**their beaks not yet turned red**

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# their beaks not yet turned red

by chaparral_crown

Summary

Will stares at the bird. The bird stares back. In its beak, a very finely embroidered cloth, and in that, the tiniest of soft fists pushing forward from a folded corner.

“Don’t you dare,” Will says, crouching, hand that is not currently cradling an overly large pour of whiskey pointed at the bird to ward it off.

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After Hannibal is arrested and the trial dates are set, the stork visits Will Graham. With it, it brings a baby, a legally binding birth certificate, and a hope chest full of gifts for her. Nobody except Will thinks this is weird.

(Alternatively, what if the Scarlet Letter was a dark romantic comedy?)

Notes

I love birds, and I love babies, and I love Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter having a bird-gifted baby. None of you can stop me.

# get ready, get set

Will, when he’s honest with himself, knows where it starts.

“What do I have left to lose, Will?” says Hannibal in the darkness of the farmhouse, sitting hunched in the side chair and profoundly tired. What a question that is. What the limits are, Will doesn't know if he's seen. There are big cold flakes falling outside, the crushing quietude of night with the dampening silence of late winter snow. Somewhere in the depths of it, a trail of dead from the Verger estate, and the heavy footprints of Hannibal’s feet carrying Will through the dark. Will's sweat falling to make little drops in the powder top. Hannibal's doing the same, every muscle straining under their shared weight.

Now watching Hannibal clutch at his notebook and the meaningless equations stretched across it, Will feels tired.

“Tell me," says Hannibal, "and you can have it.”

And Will, knowing better, wants.

(*You can lose me, you think. You can give back what you stole, you think. You can give me yourself and everything that entails, and expect nothing in return because I am out of things to give to you, you think.*)

It’s a bad idea to answer, but he does anyway. Will is tired of pretending he doesn’t need something from Hannibal, but he not only encourages Hannibal - he initiates.

The assumption would be it’s murder. Nobody will stop the presses for that. It’s what Hannibal’s been working on since day one, and Will can concede to his success in some arenas, and his failure in others. It’s become something of a game of escalation since Will realizes there was a game to begin with. Hannibal kills Beverly, Will sends Matthew Brown

to kill Hannibal. Hannibal sends Randall Tier to kill Will, and Will turns Randall Tier into a diorama with his bare hands, and then comes over to Hannibal's house like a dog that wants to show off what it found in the creek next to the road.

(*Newsflash - it's nothing worth writing home about, but you've rolled in that mess like it's disguising you from predators, and with the way that Hannibal appraises you and your bloodied hands like a jewel, it must be working.*)

The tit for tat continues. Hannibal arranges the death of Will's nascent child with Margot Verger, so Will practically gift-wraps Hannibal for Mason Verger, and this is where things become complicated and Will stops knowing what exactly it is that he wants from Hannibal, or what Hannibal wants from him, only that there's something fey and strange between them that catches his tongue like a burning brand, and now he doesn't know how to be straightforward and honest anymore.

Everything kind of goes straight to hell after that.

"I would give you anything," says Hannibal.

"You have a habit of taking things back," Will replies, afraid of letting anything he desires be known. "I want you to fix what you broke, and I don't think that's actually possible."

But it turns out it is.

Will kisses Hannibal like he means to tear his lips off. Hannibal responds in turn by sheathing Will's face between his hands, tender like he's holding a living heart. Will tears out of his own flannel pajamas, slow and clumsy with the aftereffects of Cordell's drugs, tears at Hannibal's ill-gotten black clothes from the Verger farm, and takes everything that he can find. He takes expanses of warm skin, sipping slips of tongue, the heat of being loved inside and out in the dark noiselessness of a snowstorm.

And Hannibal, unwittingly, begins the process of fixing.

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It has been a month since Jack Crawford takes Hannibal Lecter into custody in the front drive of Will Graham's house.

The gravel where Hannibal kneels is indefinable from the rest of the small stones leading to the main road. Bluestone, he is told when he orders it after a particularly messy winter, something that will compact and forget. To Will, however, it's as good as a charred spot on a white field.

Will stares at it from the peeling white wicker chairs on the raised porch. *Here lies a sad look*, thinks Will, *something I should ignore, but it stains until it has reached the edges of where it can spread.* He thinks he'd still be able to see it even if he paved the whole thing over. Asphalt, instead of bluestone. A dozen winters and springs of erosion, and each hard point where Hannibal's knees hit the rock as pale as a bone.

He is expected to give a deposition on Tuesday, the foremost evidence in the case against Doctor Hannibal Lecter, criminal and cannibal on at least 12 known counts of murder in the United States that direct evidence exists for, an additional two counts of conspiracy to commit murder, medical malpractice, evading police capture, and desecration. Will is still not sure which parts he wants to depose before the trial. He's not sure he wants to be involved at all, but between Jack Crawford, the Federal and State prosecutions, and a somewhat desperate Alana Bloom and Margot Verger who need verification of Hannibal's manual tool massacre of Mason Verger's men and Cordell Doemling, he feels an obligation to say *something*.

(*"I made it," you'll laugh from the stand. "I heard something about hor d'oeuvres and champagne after the initial witness testimonies to celebrate the occasion? We can critique each other's attempts to hide their misdoings and grade them on a scale of one to ten. Defendant and defense team invited of course," you adds. "No one appreciates the ritual of it quite like them."*)

As it is, that is Tuesday, which is at least the day after tomorrow's problem. Today, in the fading evening sunlight, he is working on Monday's problem, and that is looking increasingly like a hangover and a step closer to cirrhosis of the liver. He hasn't quite decided if it's possible to pickle oneself from the inside out, but he's going to make an honest effort. He can be someone else for a few hours, who doesn't have to think about the coming interviews and

drama and wanting to be anywhere but where he is. He doesn't have to be the adult if he doesn't want to.

There's still a bit of snow scattered and crunchy in the field leading up to the house, turned to ice in the clear skies of the gathering spring. They glow in the sunset, surrounding puddles turned the pink and purple of the sky. His fingers are hurting a bit from the cold, but he still *has* fingers, and a face, and presence to use them, and that's quite wonderful considering the events of the last year. There's a crushing purposelessness underneath his skin that feels like heartbreak, but no one's supposed to know that, and he just so badly wants to make something good out of all this trailing madness.

Will watches his breath smoke in the air. Ducks fly in the fading night towards the Potomac River in the northeast, and he stares to the west, blind to their disappearance and their vernal homes in the dark.

Fate is in motion tonight, chasing the ducks.

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There's a slam on the window of the front door. It rattles the glass, shakes the screen like it might just come clean off its hinges.

Will, definitely not in his finest of states, startles in his armchair, glass still in hand.

*To arms!* shrieks the parts of him that see Randall Tier rushing through the dining room. *Batten down the hatches. Prepare the cannons.*

Fuck, what all *is* he supposed to do? He can barely see straight and he's not ready for another round with the usual madness that insists on making house calls. What he would give for a regular proselytizing at this point. Maybe a nice midnight Jehovah's Witness, or a standard burglar that would find out very quickly that Will is in the kind of mood that makes stand your ground laws seem a little too dismissive of how terrible a person he is.

When he goes out to see what all the fuss is about, whiskey glass in hand, he turns on the porch light and slams both the wooden inner door and screen door open with an enthusiasm reserved for action films. *That is amazing*, says Will, listening to the hinges squeak, and looking to ensure he hasn't spilled his drink. *God, I have got this violence thing down. Behold my terrible visage, interlopers.*

The interloper, a huge bird in a suspicious, long-legged crouch, beholds.

Will blinks hard.

The thinking part of Will's brain begins to spin a little, fighting around the sloshing drunkenness of the other parts. Black feathers. Red beak. No nonsense reptilian gaze. Some kind of marsh bird is just a few steps away at the bottom of the stairs to the porch, fluttering its wings in the night air, but very careful to keep its head even and high. It must have hit the window in the dark, reasons Will. Maybe headed to the river, like the others, and confused by the lights of the house. By the suspicious look it gives Will with its long neck and round eyes, it seems to think there's surely been some kind of mistake.

The thinking part of Will's brain supplies: a stork. Tar colored with red and white in parts, just enough to keep it real looking instead of sinister. Not a flying replacement for the Ravenstag, but just an unfortunate nocturnal traveler. Thank god. He doesn't need anymore exotic melanistic and feathered creatures creeping around his house.

Will stares at the bird. The bird stares back, it's oily black feathers shiny in the porchlight. In its beak, a very finely embroidered cloth, and in that, the tiniest of soft fists pushing forward from a folded corner.

A stork, Will thinks with another drunk blink.

A stork with a baby.

A stork with a baby, and a fancy swaddle, and an inconceivably intricate wooden chest just behind it on the ground, like an archaic suitcase delivered by the UPS truck instead of this totally incongruous piece of furniture in the middle of nowhere, and this is when the thinking

part of Will's brain begins to slot things together not in the slow pass of a metronome, but in the scribblings of red pen going "**!!!".**

"Don't you dare," Will says, crouching, hand that is not currently cradling the overly large pour of whiskey pointed at the bird to ward it off. "Don't you dare," he repeats, and stumbles, much too drunk to do anything about it if the bird does, in fact, dare.

Across the front deck, the stork takes a step forward, red beak and legs looking blood orange dark in the yellow of the porch light. Are storks aggressive? He thinks they probably are. Trust Will Graham to get the most ominous looking stork for his very own bonafide baby delivery.

"I've been going through *things*," he emphasizes. "If you've got something else, you can add it to the queue. I can only process so much in a given year."

The stork continues to stare at him. Something in it's pointed face suggests a shrug, and a very human unwillingness to be redirected. Without very much warning, it rushes Will, flying wide winged and distinctly wild into the house.

While Will would like to say he doesn't stumble onto his ass with a gasp, snapping his head against the wood planks of the floor, he very much does, and dreams of feathers passing him over.

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He wakes in the morning with an absolutely pounding headache. It's a grey day just outside the windows, a drizzly early spring dawn that brings condensation to the old windows of the farmhouse, fighting the gentle heat of the living room. All the dogs are curled into their individual beds around the space heater on the hearth, nose to tail and unbothered by Will's dry mouthed smacking around the stale taste of his midnight drinks.

It was a hell of a dream, he thinks with a wince.

With its hell, it brings gifts. Gently propped up on the pillows next to him, a swaddled baby, dozing comfortably in the flannel sheets. Will blinks at this for the unusual vision that it is. Just underneath, a little crushed by Will's shoulder, is a notecard, a freshly made social security card with its perforations untorn, and a birth certificate in it's blue, pink, and cream printed glory.

***Certification of Vital Record - Commonwealth of Virginia*** says the top.

Will thinks he throws up a little.

***Name of Registrant:*** *Beatrice Evelyn Graham*

***Date of Birth:*** *March 25th, 20XX.*

***Place of Birth:*** *Wolf Trap, Virginia, Fairfax County*

***Maiden Name of Mother:*** *William Sawyer Graham*

***Mother's Place of Birth:*** *New Orleans, Louisiana, Orleans Parish*

***Name of Father:*** *(redacted)*

***Father's Place of Birth:*** *Utena, Aukštaitija, Lithuania*

***Date Record Filed:*** *March 25th, 20XX.*

Will blinks again, waiting for the paper to dissipate into something more sensible - maybe a bill, or a court summons. He gets a lot of those, doesn't he? But it stands unwavering in his grasp, his name and this small girl's next to it, belonging to each other.

He giggles, fingers further creasing the edges of the paper, and staves off panic about as well as he ever does, which is to say just barely, and with half of the dogs looking on with concern. No matter how many times he looks away and back to it, the information stays the same.

He turns to the notecard, opening it with shaking hands. On the front is printed a stork holding a posy of flowers, and the damning bubbly script best used on holiday

announcements and bulletin board updates in the Quantico lounge. The gold foil and glitter highlights are a perverse addition.

***Congratulations, Mr. Graham - it's a girl!***

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It's probably Will's fault.

Well, no, it's definitely Hannibal's fault, because most things are.

Hannibal's fault. It's become a sort of a habit to say this at different points of the day. A therapist would probably tell him it's an avoidant coping mechanism, but Will doesn't really go in for therapists at this point. All the ones he knows are absolutely out of their minds, validating everything he's been thinking for years. He might have been willing to see Bedelia at one point. She seems to have it somewhat together when not moonlighting as an anthropologist of a prolific serial killer's goings-on, but she's condescending and has very likely slept with Hannibal, as has Will, and no one of sound logic does that, do they?

Head hurts? Hannibal's fault - probably either due to the bone saw, the kidnapping to the Verger estate, or the cocktail of drugs he's had before almost getting his face carved off. Stomach giving him trouble? Hannibal's fault. Gut wounds take a long time to heal. Also, eating human meat is actually pretty terrible for you. You'd think an M.D. and study of brain anatomy would pick that up at some point, but it would be very much like Hannibal to roll the dice and dare prion disease to take him screaming from the world. Nightmares? Definitely Hannibal's fault, can't think of many people in recent recall that have gone out of their way to cultivate nightmares like hothouse flowers, turning their tropical and exotic leaves, marvelling at their awesome barbs and twisting shades. Drinking too much? Hannibal's fault - if Will was permitted to treasure the man that is also a monster, he wouldn't need to drown it with something else.

(*You or him? You don't know. Does it matter?*)

It only makes sense that the random chance of an infant being left by large avians of the Ciconiidae family is Hannibal's fault.

The paperwork spells it out in its absence, doesn't it? Nothing as obvious as something missing. It's a mercy of the universe that the "name of father" line is redacted, but hardly enough for Will to not see through it. Who else would condone this kind of ham-fisted symbolism, or that his stork couldn't be a normal, run-of-the-mill white stork with a white sheet? If Hannibal Lecter's child can't be born the old-fashioned screaming into the void covered in amniotic fluid and blood kind of way, by golly, she will definitely be carried by the most ominous looking of animals, with hand embroidered Brittany lace as her swaddle, so help me God. The gall that the stupid bird has to name Will as the mother while Hannibal gets to be both the father and redacted for confidentiality is just a cherry on this fantastically iced bullshit cake.

(*Do storks actually prepare local municipal documents, and the front desk staff has always been a ruse to get you to take a number and sit in a government office waiting for your random string of numbers and letters to come up? Do birds even know how to use printers? Wouldn't the feathers be kind of shitty for selecting preferred print stations? Do they have to delicately peck at the keyboard with their face instead? Is that why it takes so long, and is so error-prone? You are absolutely ablaze with questions. You hysterically wonder if you're not going to take the Public Records office by storm, demanding to see the back room.*)

It must be a joke. It's just another thing in this long parade of mortal sins perpetuated on him by Hannibal. No one would ever actually want to give Will Graham a baby and expect it to be anything other than a disaster.

Really, it's very cruel. The discovery, the redaction, the fact that Will is going to have to consciously decide to undo it - it's all cruel. This will make the third child that he's had dropped on him, and then had it taken away.

He looks back down to the pillows and the folds of sheets at the tiny person taking over the space to the left of him on the bed, sleeping as snugly as though she had been there forever. Beatrice, the birth certificate and social cards said. Will looks down at her closed eyes, little fingernails scratching at the inside of her fists, the sparsest wisps of blonde hair on the crown of her head, and can't find it in him to be mad at her.

It actually hurts how much he wants this, this little piece of something that is still clean and wholesome. Everything in him revolts at the logic of him ever having a baby with Hannibal Lecter, but how wonderful would it have been if it was true? That he could be given this as some sort of recompense, third time's the charm.

He takes her little wrist in hand and gives it a kiss. His head is almost bigger than her, and it burns him to pull away.

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Will calls the local police station to start, which turns into calling the Department of Children's Services, which turns into calling Public Records and the Social Security office. If this is a joke, absolutely no one is budging on admitting to it, and Will is actually impressed for the first three hours of time spent on hold with call centers and transfers to very confused administrative assistants and vital records staff. By the fourth one, he is distressed.

"I have a baby," he says, each time, like an accusation.

"Yes, of course Mr. Graham, congratulations!" comes the inevitable reply. "Is there anything I can do to help you with? We know a lot of first time parents aren't sure what the particulars are for certificates and registration, and really the hospitals aren't much help. Send you right home with a newly made person without an instruction guide."

Will pinches the bridge of his nose. "No, she came from a stork," he says, trying to shock some sense into this conversation. Maybe they'll even come tot he conclusion he's experiencing some sort of psychotic break and he won't have to explain much at all. "Big bird? Lives in bogs and freshwater shorelines? Generally used as a thinly veiled way to avoid explaining sexual congress to children?"

"Oh yes, not a problem Mr. Graham," is the rebuttal, dreamy and vacant. "Did she come with her documents already prepared?"

"Uh," says Will, intelligently.

“The baby,” comes the patient reply. “Does she have her vital records already?”

He scrambles for the papers, but with each time he reads off the details, the certificate number, the social security number, the birth date, the registered address, pretty much anything except the listed father, which wow, not a conversation he feels like having at the moment, he gets the same confirmation. “Sounds like everything’s in order! You should make an appointment with a pediatrician - if you need any recommendations, I’d be happy to point you to the nearest pediatric clinic in your area, but otherwise, you should be good to go!”

They hang up, the fourth one today to do so. Will stares at his phone like it’s turned into a squirming fish, unhappy in the grasp of his hand.

“What the *actual fuck,* ” he whispers, baby in the crook of his other arm, precious as a jewel and sleeping quietly despite the drone of bureaucratic automated phone directories, cheery twenty-somethings trying to understand what the problem is, and the inevitable exasperated management telling him that this child belongs to him without question, despite it being literally less than 12 hours since she appeared hung from the beak of a bird that *isn’t even native to the United States*.

The real skeptic in him marvels that the government could ever be that efficient, he thinks with a snort.

The documents continue to glare up from the kitchen counter.

The baby continues to sleep.

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It’s another hour before Will really has to survey from a logical point of view what is happening when trying to get other, *responsible* adults to take the wheel fails.

Forget the papers, he thinks hysterically. He had been so certain just by his name alone that child protective services would be breaking down the door to make sure that someone of Will's caliber wasn't allowed to have a baby. *Will Graham's got a baby*, would be the rallying cry, and every rational person between here and the Atlantic Coast would understand the *dire consequences* of this. The fact that he straight-faced tells every last one of them that she was delivered to his doorstep in a white cross-stitch and lace shawl should have been the clencher.

This information is not only received with positive affirmations, but promises to mail him new parent materials. "Nutrition and health is important at this stage!" the chipper pediatric food stamps official tells him when he transferred on call number two.

(*I don't need food stamps, comes the inevitable thought, ringing in your head. I need someone to realize I am out of my depth, and inherently unfit, but also that the delivery of infants should not be conducted by Eurasian flying animals.*)

He considers he might be sick again, but...everything feels normal, with exception of literal infants being deposited like Amazon packages. He had double checked with a medical specialist after Hannibal was arrested, just to make sure the new gunshot wound in his shoulder, buzz cut to the forehead, beatings from the Verger thugs, and various random drugs that he'd been recently bombarded with didn't have any lasting effects. Just a normal day for me, he had joked, but joking aside, had a clean bill of health for a late thirties male with as much wear and tear as him. The doctor, a severe looking woman that listened as he named off injuries and corroborated with scars, puncture wounds, and his elaborate history of illness, had looked at him like he was a very strange looking bug.

Physical confirmation of the reality of things, other than the baby, would help dispel the persistence of this fear. He thinks of the stork again, but also the chest behind it. If it's gone, he'll know better.

He keeps the baby (*Beatrice, Hannibal insists behind your eyes*) in a careful hold with his left arm, but tears through the front door to where, sure enough, the giant chest is still sitting in the front drive, looking more ridiculous and expensive in the midday sun than it did at midnight with the stork in front of it. It looks very heavy as well - long enough to lay down in were it empty - a very comely coffin. The wood is a warm spicy brown, whorls of flowers leading to the silver front handle.

He doesn't know how it's possible, only that the cosmos deserves some sort of irony award for its continued presence.

He opens it with his free hand, and gapes at the contents.

Blankets, bibs, little knitted caps and clothes, canisters of formula and bottles, cloth diapers, and a first aid kit with essentials for children. All the necessities, as full as is comfortable with a little room to spare. Do birds do first time parent chests, or is this the standard edition? Will very nearly laughs out loud when one swaddling cloth is revealed to have a pattern of green and blue deer dancing over vines and roses. It's not technically *everything* he needs by modern standards, but it's enough to get him through the week and come to some sort of clarity on what his next steps are.

Next steps.

*Oh my god*, he thinks for probably the hundredth time today, looking down at the baby who is beginning to snuffle a bit with awareness in her blanket, fingers flexing in the chilly spring air. *This is actually happening.*

(*A brief history of your day so far: a giant bird has delivered an actual newborn to you. She has come equipped with basic supplies. She is registered with the county, the state, and the federal government. They're actually going to leave this baby in your care, because she is yours, and Hannibal's, and you're going to have to decide how you feel about that pretty damn fast.*)

She's probably hungry, comes the stray observation. Babies eat a lot and frequently, or some you've heard. This creates a whole new wave of panic in Will, who has to hold his breath and bear down to slow his heart.

He grabs a canister of the formula from the chest and a baby bottle, heads inside, and begins to read the side like it's a sacred text. He has no idea what he's doing, only that she doesn't seem upset with the mild temperature of the mixture, and that she doesn't seem inclined to crying.

When she opens her eyes, and Will looks down to the dark blue irises of the newly made, he wants to crush her to him, and hide her under his ribs. He didn't know he could love something like this, and it's startling how painful it is. Oh sure, he thinks he's loved Hannibal with the pain of something like a closed fist on his throat before, but in the absence of wrongdoing and conflict, Beatrice is something other.

"Good job, baby girl. Good job, Beatrice," he tells her when the bottle is done, patting at her back and listening to her quiet breaths until she falls asleep again.

He puts her down in the nook of the pillow to the left of where he sleeps, just as he found her this morning. He doesn't have somewhere better yet - fuck, he doesn't even have a car seat to go pick something out, but it'll have to do for tonight. The dogs are curious of her, and he has to shoo Buster away while Winston and Harley try to lick at her tiny balled fists, eager to introduce themselves to their newest sister.

It's seven o'clock in the evening when Will lays down next to her, just watching, his glasses askew. He's managed some toast and a few glasses of water, but hangovers don't disappear for surprise babies, and had Will been anticipating one, he might have gone a little lighter on the sauce last night, maybe offered the stork a congratulatory glass of its own. That would be the polite thing, he guesses.

There's still the sensation that any minute now, somebody's going to roll up to the house and arrest him, like he's committed a crime. Will supposes he hasn't killed her yet, and that's as good a start as any reluctant parent gets.

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In the hours following, he says it as often as he can.

"Beatrice," he repeats to himself in the middle of the night, holding the bottle and watching her eat again with a lazy enthusiasm. This makes for feeding number three, and if Will didn't feel so much like he was being waterboarded after being woken for the second time in a row in a long march of confusing hours, he'd think he's got this down already.

If he says the name enough times, maybe it'll feel less weird. As it is, the primary thing he thinks looking down at her in the light of the lamp next to the couch is *mine*.

It's obviously the name of Hannibal's choosing, no matter his feelings of ownership - Jack found him lecturing on Dante in Florence, living another life, perhaps one he would prefer. It doesn't take a profiler for him to acknowledge the symbolism of it, the *beau ideal*, courtly love without the constraint of desire. His jewel on a high mountain, his fine, untouchable Florentine lady.

(*In another time, in Hannibal's office: Hannibal at his bookshelves wielding Paradiso and a glass of something red with the casual intimacy of friends on a late night, and you tired but appreciative of the company, listening. "Here powers failed my high imagination," he breathes, "but by now my desire and will were turned." You don't want* ***him*** *yet here, but you want what he represents, what strength and passions he is unashamed of. Is Beatrice a fire in his heart even in this hall of memory, where Abigail is still living?*)

Will recognizes the middle name from his mother, Evelyn, something he himself has only ever seen on a birth certificate of his own, but concocts the wild imaginings of a child about their mother regardless. It's the name he would have wanted, and in that, he doesn't really have any complaints.

How birds decide what your favorite baby book name is beyond Will's pay grade, but he thinks they did well by someone as convoluted as Hannibal. Alternatively, maybe storks enjoy the Golden Girls. His mother's name isn't such a reach, but if a stork understands the inspiration it inspires in him as a boy, he doesn't put it past them. Nothing really makes sense, so why set the bar at middle naming conventions?

"Beatrice," he says again. "Bea. My Bea."

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Tuesday morning rolls in with bleary eyes, and a wide eyed baby idly stretching her legs on the edge of the bed while Will drinks coffee as a lifeline. He has manhandled her into a close-footed blue onesie and a little matching cap, though Will knows full well she wouldn't care if it matched or not. The cloth diaper was more of a learning curve, but as a man with seven dogs and a few too many experiences covered in bodily fluids, he just sighs and tries to be

gentle and mindful. Every minor inconvenience is the worst thing to ever happen to you when you're only a day old.

He unrepentantly calls the prosecutor's office in DC as soon as he thinks is reasonable to leave a message that he's sick and they'll need to reschedule his formal deposition. He didn't want to go today anyway - he probably ought to extend a thank you to Beatrice for her service. He idly wonders if having a stork baby with the defendant qualifies for him for spousal immunity, and wouldn't it be great if he could trigger a Supreme Court hearing over it.

Local Virginia man takes case to Supreme Court over testimony rights following avian love child delivery before serial killer lover is set to go on trial. The Justices will hear arguments today, the local news would say, posting Will's best headshots from incarceration, and airbrushed glamour shots of his daughter between him and scrolling headlines about Hannibal the Cannibal.

He also wonders if he's supposed to tell Hannibal. Will thinks he's heard about that between coworkers, college friends, TV programs - secret love children that men feel they missed a connection with. Angry teenagers that come to find them later in life, feeling abandoned when they are merely ignorant. Hannibal would think it's unforgivable to say nothing, but at present, Will doesn't even know what to say.

(*Thanks for the passionate fuck before going to prison, you think while the vision of you waving through the visitation room's glass divider, and you using a hand to make the baby wave hers. Thanks for putting some thought into your last gift to me. I love her more than I thought I was capable of, in spite of you rearranging what it means to love something over and over again. See you for major holidays and visitation hours when I can bear to think of you without wanting to die of loneliness.*)

Will takes a sip of coffee.

(*Put a pin in that.*)

With some very sparse sleep and time, Will knows there's a lot to accomplish today. To start, he needs to get that wooden chest in the house. It's supposed to rain tomorrow. He supposes it's time to start taking some responsibility for his baby.

He refuses to take responsibility for the appearance of the bird itself, or that it has decided on Will's behalf that the proper gestational period for divinely gifted sky babies is about 30 days from conception. Most mothers (*you shudder - father, you are a father dammit*) would have about 30 days to realize they were having a baby, much less have one dropped on their doorstep. Will feels cheated by about 270 days to reconcile himself to this. He would have appreciated at least a week to obsess over baby monitors or strollers like everyone else gets to.

He jams his foot no less than three times shuffling it from driveway to porch stoop, from stoop to patio, the bulky legs of it screeching their resistance from beginning to end. Solid wood, Will thinks to himself, and finds himself wishing on several occasions that the storks craftsmanship is very great, but perhaps would be better conserved by not making magically fucking heavy utility storage. He considers its contents again when it finally sits smug and immovable in the heart of the living room, at home, beautiful, and more than Will bargained for.

As it is, he'll have to panic ride to the closest Wal-Mart, baby strapped to him, and pray to not get (*rightfully for once*) pulled over before he can get the car seat.

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Another step, he thinks, looking through local pediatric doctors. It seems like the responsible thing to do after the progression of public offices telling him to do it. Kids need nutrition, check ups, someone for Will to call if things go wrong.

He figures this is a good baseline to establish before doing a sleepless, car-seatless nightmare run to a superstore twenty minutes away. Just in case.

Pediatrics is apparently where all the fun is in the DC Metro area, with a parade of very noble looking people come up under his insurance plan. Will's hardly rolling in money, and the FBI sabbatical pay is tenuous at best at this point, but he's always been very careful. If the government gives him the boot, well, he knows he'll be ok for a while. He's fine with blowing some of the savings on his baby. It's not even a question, the same way it's never been a question for the dogs. Once the commitment is made, the responsibility is unshakeable.

However the parade of doctors doesn't really mean anything to him. He's known a lot of doctors, and most of them have been shit.

(*Imagine what it would be like if it could have been Hannibal, how careful he would have been. He's never been consistently careful with you, but for his beau ideal, his Beatrice? How his broad hands could have been made feather light to consider the small articulations of her wrists, her elbows, her shoulders, knees, ankles, fingers, toes. What awe he would have felt, listening to her little heart and lungs, even if he didn't need a replacement child the way that you did. Even if it was just to marvel what he had been brought.*)

The phone screen in front of him ripples a little. He has to blink it away.

Will's throat tightens, but he soldiers on through the list. He doesn't really know what he should be looking for, but they're all from prestigious programs and good hospitals. He picks the first kind-eyed woman in the list with five stars. She looks nice, and she has five children of her own, and that's got to be something of a commendation, even if Will doesn't recognize the significance of her fellowships, or the quality of her character.

"I have a baby," he tells the receptionist for the pediatric clinic when he finally builds up the confidence to call.

"...and what would you like to do with them, sir?" comes the hesitant question.

Will clears his throat, and withholds a scathing reply. He hasn't really provided for her to work with, even if he thinks it's fairly obvious what he would call about. "Schedule an appointment?"

"And you are?"

Will pauses, tongue cleaving to the top of his mouth.

(*Wow, right out the gate with that one, you think. I am a mess. I am a profiler that thinks about killing people a lot, because I've been told that's what I'm good at. The thinking, probably the killing too. I'm not sure what I am doing right now, only that I've called out of my deposition, and I've accidentally summoned a European bird to my house with an infant and have been reliably informed it's mine, in conjunction with my on-and-off again something or another and lover. I am having mixed feelings about this information. I am wishing I had help. I am afraid I am going to do something wrong, and I couldn't stand it if I did it again, now when it matters more than ever that I don't.*)

"I'm her father," he says, and tastes the words. They're a little awkward still, the same way shoes feel a little strange when they're new, but he likes them. He's unexpectedly proud of them.

"She's kind of unexpected," Will continues, "and I don't have any relevant medical history for you because she's brand new, but I want to make sure she's ok and I guess get her on the right track." That sounds correct, he thinks.

It's a start, and the receptionist must accept Will Graham's approximation of normal human father, and says the doctor will see them on Friday.

He wishes the dumb black bird could have at least left a twenty step program or something to help him get started, to make this less bizarre and disorienting. It's not rocket science, but it **is** excruciatingly important, and Will has no one to share that with other than the small person lightly kicking at his knee, clothed foot covering her splayed toes. Every one of them hidden beneath is a miracle.

# what to expect when you weren't expecting

The cognitive dissonance of the general public is persistent. Will has long since accepted this following his incarceration when everyone and their mother was thinking that he's some kind of bogeyman, while Hannibal, *literally eating people*, continued to make puns and dance around the issues with enviable ease. They are happy to forgive the socialite's hidden meanness, and disdain his honest and open kind. It's made him bitter in some ways.

Today, however, it's working in his favor, and Will isn't one to look a gift-horse in the face.

(*A gift-bird, yes, you will 100% look it in the face. Raise your fists, like that's how you fight a bird that weighs about as much as the average brook trout. Maybe run. Keep in mind that it will retaliate and gift you a concussion for the nerve for not thanking it for dropping its initial gift of parenthood on you like a ton of bricks.*)

His string of bad luck with all things related to Hannibal and the judicial system continues into Tuesday afternoon. He makes it to within two minutes of the exit for the Wal-Mart when a police car pulls up next to him on the toll road meaning to pass him. Will, driving one-handed with a peaceful baby snuggled up to him in the crook of his left arm and the wheel in his right, contemplates cheekily waving when the officer in the cab next to them looks into theirs. *Obviously* this is not the ideal way to transport infants. *Obviously* this is why he must be seen doing so.

He's pretty sure he's read something about facing fear and adversity head on. Make eye contact. Establish you're the alpha male, or something. Make it weird by making thinly veiled literary references to temptation and slaying your fellow man, and look at your glass of wine like you're going to consume it whole-heartedly with veiled intent.

Wait, no, that's Hannibal's advice, and that's hardly the kind anyone should be taking these days. There lies the path to dropping church ceilings on worshippers for the irony of it, and probably a future case of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

He'll put the fact that he's being pulled over as another one down for Hannibal's Fault today on account of bad self-esteem, bad social advice, and terrible life coaching. He and Margot should probably write a book of Lecterisms while the interest is high surrounding the trial. The earnings might put Beatrice through college, and that's something he really hadn't been needing to think about two days prior. It can be his second most cited publication, right after *Standard Monograph on Determining Time of Death by Insect Activity*, because dammit, the clerid beetle is important, and Hannibal's not about to blow all his thesis work out of the water because he had a profoundly different experience reading *The Joy of Cooking*.

Alas, the officer, and the inevitability of the flashing red and blue lights of the deputy sheriff's car.

Will pulls to the side of the road and tries to appear intentional instead of simply an idiot.

"Sir, are you aware of the child passenger laws for the state of Virginia?" asks the officer, aviator sunglasses entirely inappropriate for a cloudy afternoon in March. They are disgustingly clean for polarized lenses, save a thumbprint at the top left corner. A hard ass, probably, but one that might be willing to fudge the edges of this encounter.

Will sighs, fishing for Beatrice's birth certificate in his jeans pocket, as she looks out the window myopically at the officer, squinting into the breeze and the sound of the cars passing by. For what it's worth, the officer smiles at her and tries to offer a finger for her to grab, but Beatrice is two days old and has the motor skills of a peanut, and misses it entirely to instead scratch with tiny nails at her cheek in what could be confusion, happiness, or cosmic ambivalence.

What kind of emotions do infants have? Will looks forward to when she can properly communicate. She *is* theoretically Hannibal's child, so there's a chance that she'll opt not to communicate clearly at all, or use grandiose symbolism-laden body tableaus instead of her words. He's counting on nurture over nature here, and really, he shouldn't put that thought into the universe. The universe has been in a giving mood this week, and Will's ill-prepared to handle more.

"Yes sir, we're just on our way to Wal-Mart right now," Will replies with a shake of his head, getting his license and the birth certificate in hand. He gives his most beseeching and exhausted of looks, feeling like an idiot for even thinking what he's about to say, but unwilling to let this particular sleeping dog lie.

“The stork brought her yesterday,” he says, straight-faced, dead-panned, cool as a cucumber, “and I didn’t really have anything I needed on such short notice.”

The officer takes both documents in hand, and nods earnestly. Will wonders if he’ll be asked to step out of the car now, or if the officer will wait to do a courtesy check. He relaxes his hands on the steering wheel - prepares for the confirmation that everyone else has been determined to deny him thus far. What authority would allow Will Graham to keep a baby after that particular explanation?

Instead, he is perfectly pleasant, saccharine the same way the public records people had been. “Not the first time it’s happened!” he says with another nod of the head.

Will nods with the same earnestness, mentally going blank. "You do realize I mean an actual giant fish-eating, egg laying bird known for nesting on chimneys and telephone polls, right?” he asks.  "You're ok with that?"

The officer is unperturbed by this clarification. If anything, he seems more enthused than ever to be of service. “Let me go ahead and escort you the rest of the way - I’d like to make sure the two of you make it safely. Thanks for having everything ready to go, Mr. Graham,” he says with a tip of the aviators and just like that, he hands back the drivers license and certificate, and walks back to his own cruiser.

Will puzzles for only a moment before allowing himself to respond to the closed windows of the Volvo's cab.

“*What the fuck*,” Will whispers to himself for not the first time in two days, rolling up the car window and turning on the engine, jostling Beatrice who gives him what he can only presume to be a gurgle of dissatisfaction. Or supreme ennui.

God, is he the **only** one around here that finds any of this strange?

“Sorry,” he absently apologizes, petting at the soft skin beside her eyes and pulling at the cap on her head to cover her ears. Beatrice just scratches at it again with her terrifyingly tiny nails, and Will makes a mental note to buy clippers.

The escort takes them straight to the parking lot, ensures the baby seat they buy fits the back of the Volvo, offers recommendations, and is the sixth person in two days to offer to send new parenting materials, like all the others were insufficient or not to his personal parenting standards.

(*You try to not reject it on principle - you’ve never been one to take instructions well, and if you start getting a series of leaflets about covering the power outlets in the house, gently needling you about the vaccine booster shots that you damn well intend to have done, and the importance of support systems, you will definitely kill yourself long before Hannibal Lecter gets another go at it.*)

"Thanks," says Will instead of screaming at the unreasonableness of reality. "She's my first."

Will, carrying Beatrice’s seat by the broad handle, and feeling a little adrift without her warm stone of a body over his heart for the first time in those two days, tries to shop for necessities and groceries, checking constantly under the seat cover to make sure she’s still there. The spandex stretch of little sheep on the cloth is cute, and keeps it dark and warm for a late afternoon nap, but he much prefers to count her eyelashes, and confirm she hasn’t vanished as quickly as she arrived.

So maybe reality is allowed to persist with its unreasonableness a bit longer.

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**Things that the stork should have thought to include in his treasure chest of items necessary for an infant to have, according to the baby aisle of Wal-Mart, the three parenting magazines he grabs near the books, and the various and sundry forums he looks through on the internet when he becomes frustrated with navigating what he’s fairly sure is just unnecessary iterations of pacifiers:**

***One (1) Baby Car Seat, Detachable -*** While it is not inconceivable that a delivery service conducted by giant birds carrying children in folded linens would miss this very basic safety feature, it does not change that Will would prefer to not have been pulled over, or given strange looks while escorted by officer through Wal-Mart to pick out a seat with no prior research done out of desperation. He has hopefully selected one that does not garner a carefully worded recall letter in two years time.

***One (1) Crib or Bassinet -*** It is entirely bullshit to know storks can bother with appropriately decorated swaddling cloths to make jokes about you and your redacted baby daddy's history, but can't bother with something for the baby to sleep in. Aren't storks known for making nests? Isn't this a major oversight for a shelter building animal? Five star baby, zero star service there.

***Three (3) containers of a pre-approved No-Tears Shampoo -*** Will has not yet braved bathtime by the close of Tuesday night, too overwhelmed to consider it anywhere near a top-list priority. He knows that it needs to be done at some point, but much like his own crippling indecision when faced with picking out new hair cleansing products, it is twice as anxiety inducing to do it for a baby girl. As is tradition, he picks an all-in-one for soap and hair, because it's working for him, and this is already complicated enough without also needing to pay attention to user reviews on the merits of jojoba as conditioner, or tea tree oil as a mild treatment for diaper rash and thrush during a bath.

***Infinite (Literal ∞) Baby Wipes -*** Will manages to jerry rig a solution of ancient dove soapbar, oil, distilled water, and paper towels to make it through the two diaper changes following the first one, but spends a lot of that time apologizing to Beatrice, promising her less of a hack job as soon as they can go to the store. He doesn't care what the traditional methods were before commercially produced baby wipes. He's a middle class white male who demands the normalcy of heavily marketed baby wipes for the hind end of his impromptu baby, especially if he's doomed to do this solo until potty training is possible, or the universe corrects this error in the code.

Chasing this list, another one of great significance.

**Things that Will Graham, ( *single?* ) parent, not the first of his kind but clearly needed as some sort of analyst for looking into criminal waste in the baby retail industrial complex, would very much like to never see again:**

***Insistence on dogs being for boys, and cats for girls.*** Dogs are for everyone. So is plaid, the color green, and giraffes, though it came as a surprise for giraffes to largely be confined to girls clothes at the time of purchase. If he were three years old again, he thinks he might have something to complain to his own father about. Suffice to say, Beatrice goes home with a variety of new clothes in completely random colors, motifs, and intentions, with very little regard for the marketing demographic.

(*The one exception made to this is frilled socks and glitter shoes - you can remember being in second grade, and all the girls on picture day acting as if it was the second coming of Christ when their mothers provide shining silver or red or gold shoes, ready for Dorothy to go to Oz in. They're always cheaply made, something meant for family photos, and surely not very comfortable for someone who's only figured out how to curl their fingers and toes days earlier, but holding them like little fishing lures in your hand, you want them with a strange obsessive desire.* )

***Self-rocking anything -*** There's something about paying to not see to his daughter's comfort that chafes at him. Will Graham is a child of a practical working class upbringing, single parent Beau Graham cutting away anything that could be perceived as "ridiculous big house shit". Will Graham will use his own goddamn hands to rock cribs, seats, toys, status quos, whatever it is that needs rocking. He's a manual dexterity kind of guy in most arenas of life, and this seems like a weird time to outsource it.

If anything, it's really unfortunate he opts to be the receiving party in his one experience with gay sex out of efficiency, an overwhelming need to push forward against logic, and a general lack of information on the mechanics of it - if he had any idea what he was doing (*emotionally or performatively*), he could probably have rocked Hannibal's world as effectively as he intends to rock the baby seat, albeit for entirely different purposes, and in entirely less wholesome ways.

He also might have been named the father on the birth certificate if he had, if some juvenile schools of thought have any truth to them. This possibility will haunt him for a while.

***Parenting advice books -*** While the baby naps in the seat, and Will dodges having people trying to look into the crease in the cover to get a look at her like she is a zoo animal instead of a baby at rest and not presently at need, he very briefly rustles through what he guesses amounts to a self-help section at Wal-Mart. This is perhaps the saddest progression of words and decision making that have manifested in several weeks. Considering the external help he has received from esteemed professionals in the mental health field and the myriad tri-fold mailers, this is still perhaps the safest option.

He looks at the table of contents of a few parenting guides, and concludes that his attempts at raising a child will probably be conducted without the glossy varnish of women in their nuclear families, talking about post-partum depression, nursing, and bonding with the father. There's a glaring absence of all three, and something about the image of smiling families in restful white and beige living rooms with babies sleeping in cliche wool blankets makes him feel more inept than ever.

His life is never going to look like this. He could pull a lady off the street tomorrow and marry her, and he still doesn't think this looks like something he could put together. Instead, it puts *him* in a surreal mood, setting the books back on their shelves, to be forgotten, to not tell him he is somehow lesser.

(*You had and have problems with that without also having to read the psychological merits of skin-on-skin interaction while at the hospital after the baby's delivery, and that you are failing by default without having a choice in the matter. She didn't come screaming from your body and need the assurance that you are still together. It's you that's screaming that something integral has arrived, and you are missing things because you are who you are, and you're afraid that means you don't do things right.*)

Lastly, a third list of personal importance.

**A series of spite purchases, completed by Will Graham as some sort of universal acknowledgement of how his life is going these days, things that he found funny, and how he intends to live vicariously through his less than a month old daughter in hopes there's some kind of redemption arc waiting at the end of all this:**

***One (1) Stork toy -*** Obvious reasons. This one of white and much less ominous than the magical one that brings offspring. Beatrice is ambivalent to its existence, other than as an obstacle to stretching out on the bed when the swaddle is loose, but Will feels somewhat maudlin looking down at her doing her fussing stretches before her dinner, and snaps a quick picture on his phone.

He stops right after he does it for the first time, looking at the glowing square of her image on the phone. Do you just look at them for your own benefit? Is Will supposed to send pictures

to other people? He doesn't know if Beau even knows how to text more than two words at a time, or an emoji if he's feeling particularly feisty. He certainly doesn't know if Beau is going to congratulate him if he sends it or ask if he just didn't think to wear a condom despite no uteruses being involved in the process to Will's knowledge.

***One (1) Dog-Shaped Pacifier Clip -*** Also obvious reasons. It looks vaguely like Buster, and Will has a hard time keeping track of basics at the moment, so keeping track of a pacifier is really not very high up in the hierarchy of needs. It looks like a little medal of distinguishment over her heart - *best in class*, he thinks off-handedly, pinning it there with the ceremony it deserves.

***Two (2) absurd Newborn Dresses -*** Will considers them absurd because he doesn't know where she's going to wear them, much less if she'll wear them without wailing complaint, but much like the glitter shoes with their frilly socks, he sees them and thinks of the other half of their missing equation, and what the redacted father would pick out.

(*You shouldn't care. You do.*)

He gets two when he ends up split between options. Plaid and a little blue velvet for one, and pale blue sequins with frilly french tulle that probably gets in the way or gathers spit up more readily than it is useful for the second. They're more appropriate for pictures, or holidays, or christenings, or other things people with family and social lives do. Maybe she can wear them in public for the inevitable moment somebody he actually knows sees Beatrice, and a clock starts ticking somewhere.

(*And it will - start ticking down. The inevitability of Hannibal's trial, your involvement, your needing to decide what to do next because you can't just think of yourself. You had planned to forget Hannibal by one means or another once your legal obligation to recall him had passed, but now the best part of him lives in your house, and that's just not even feasibly possible anymore. But, you still have tonight, and maybe the night after, and the night after that if you can be smart, if you can be what's needed for her to stay.*)

(*God, this is all so much.*)

***One (1) Case of Beef Jerky and four (4) boxes of Life Cereal***. Time is ephemeral when you wake up every two hours to feed, burp, and change the diaper of a baby. Will doesn't trust

himself to turn on the stove, but he thinks he can manage milk with cereal in a bowl, and some sort of protein in the in-between hours.

For the sake of his health, he buys a bottle of men's multivitamins, a multi-pack of granola bars, a bag of carrots, and orange juice. Those all sound responsible. He also hides a bottle of Wild Turkey at the bottom of his cart, and gives the cashier the kind of look that suggests retaliation if she asks about anything but his ID when she rings it up, but this is Wal-Mart, and of course she says nothing, even if Will is practically vibrating with self-consciousness. He doesn't think he'll use it, but he's out, and it's not like he's breastfeeding and getting the baby drunk the way you yourself get drunk before being given babies by wild animals.

***One (1) Pre-paid Phone, 100 Hours.*** If shit gets terrible, well, it never hurts to get out of town and call a familiar face. Early spring is the nicest time of year around his father's house, and while he hates the idea of doing some sort of walk of shame back to the South over having a baby, like he's been naughty outside of wedlock and is ruined for marriage prospects and must retreat outside of the Capital like a wilting maid, he also understands that his life is much more complicated with Beatrice, even if the actual necessities by the hour have become much more clear. If he needs to make a call, he needs to make a call.

***One (1) Baby Announcement Greeting Card, the front of which reading "You Have a New Daughter!" -*** Will agonizes over this, standing in the greeting card aisle, full cart and baby carrier to his left and kitschy messages to his right. At least two employees ask if he needs help while considering it in his hands, and Will, tired and embarrassed again, waves them off.

"Blank on the Inside!" reads a sticker on the front.

Blank indeed, much like his imagination when trying to craft what he would even say. It's heinously tacky, something he'd expect to receive from one of the blue-hairs in the library and records offices at Quantico. It's not really meant for informing someone like Will's own gold-leaf and glitter card had been as much as it's meant to be an obvious statement. "You have an infant!" it proclaims on behalf of relatives that are not close enough to call, but closely related enough to feel the need to acknowledge it. "I have taken the time to remember that this is a life occasion of importance!"

The image of a baby spoon on a party tablecloth feels a little too pointed, but Will buys the card with Hannibal in mind, and figures that it would be best to go in with the attitude he intends to maintain, and that means a series of terrible dining puns. It sits unsorted and

accusatory from the bottom of a plastic shopping bag when he gets home. The same inevitability of his missed deposition radiates from the cheap cardstock, and Will still doesn't know what to write.

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Wednesday morning, the Federal prosecutor's office calls, and nobody is happy about it.

The ringtone wakes him promptly at 8:30 am on the dot, and it is incongruously loud after a quiet hour spent dozing with Beatrice on his chest as happy as a frog on a leaf, and all the dogs more or less contented on the floor following their breakfast once the baby was handled. Max and Buster alike have balanced their noses on Will's ankle at the foot of the bed. Will sends rapid apologies to them when he jerks it up in surprise.

At the first ring of the phone from the kitchen counter, Beatrice wakes with a righteous fury. Will is righteously furious too, because the baby is awake, and the scant hours he has been able to catch of rest have him half-convinced he needs to take up a cocaine habit, or call for some kind of help, and there's nothing that he could say about Hannibal or his involvement with him right now that would be more important than the hour of sleep he's going to miss as a result of this.

He hasn't showered. He hasn't done laundry, save for the few things he needs for the baby, which he has to do twice, because he forgets to switch it from washer to dryer the first time, and it sits overnight and dries smelling of bad housekeeping and poor baby management. He's privately amazed the phone is even still alive - Will doesn't remember the last time he charged it.

Beatrice squeals around a pacifier, and Will crosses the room with her in hand to answer.

*Same*, he thinks, listening to her grow from mildly inconvenienced to hysterical when it becomes clear that the morning nap will not resume quickly.

"H'llo?" he says, gently bouncing his unruly swaddled daughter. Beatrice responds to this by waving her fists, trying to fuss around his insistent attempts to put the pacifier back in place.

It is unclear if the bouncing or the pacifier is having any sort of positive influence.

There's a pause. "Mr. Graham?"

"Yes, 's me," he says smartly.

Another suspicious pause. "Mr. Graham, are you alright?"

"God, I wish," Will sighs, tucking the phone to his ear, moving to the kitchen to begin warming a bottle. Pacifier has failed - initiate food appeasement. He clears his throat, and tries to approximate what professionalism sounded like a week ago. "This is Will Graham," he annunciates with pointed clarity, "what can I do for you?"

There's a shuffling sound on the other end. "Mr. Graham, I'm the assistant for Mr. Warren of the U.S. Attorney's Office for the State of Maryland. We had received your cancellation for yesterday's deposition, and I hope you're quite well, but I've been asked to schedule in again as quickly as possible. What is your availability like for next week?"

"Really terrible," he says glibly, putting a glass bottle in the microwave to heat. It is maybe the one thing the stork includes in the baby cache of value, even if their propensity to break makes him nervous - bottles that he doesn't have to buy specialized equipment to warm.

Perhaps it's time for another attempt to establish the absolute unbelievability of this situation? Maybe the phenomenon of it being totally acceptable and normal and *not at all a sign of a psychotic break* is isolated to officials being paid with municipal funds? Is Beatrice real, he ponders, bouncing her more as she attempts to grab his white undershirt, furiously spitting the pacifier out over and over. Is he just touting a bag of rice around, and everyone's too polite to tell him the basmati is not a baby?

(*"Dangerous man seen in local Wal-Mart with bag of grains that he insists is his offspring with unnamed serial killer from very specific previous northern Soviet country because he is incapable of admitting to crushing need to be in his company," says the local radio station in your head. "Armed with bad attitude and delusions of fatherhood, known criminal record, and an increasing lack of aversion to extreme acts of petty revenge and murder, Graham is*

*expected to respond poorly to being told he is wrong about anything, not just the rice baby. Proceed with extreme caution when approaching."*)

He looks down at her and presses the tip of her nose. She waves her fists, startled, and drools a little. He wipes it away with the hem of his shirt, and thinks she's an incredibly cute starch if she is one.

"Stork came," says Will, the same way his daddy describes a weather front, rambling. What the hell anyway. No one seems to care. "Only two days in. Not really sleeping lately... and not really sure how to handle childcare in these circumstances. I've read that newborns take more than the average babysitter, and the nearest qualified teenager is probably in Alexandria."

There's yet another pause.

Will holds his breath for laughter.

"Congratulations, Mr. Graham!" comes the reply, very honestly *excited*. Wonders never cease, it seems. Will stirs and tests formula temperature on his wrist, snorting around an incredulous laugh, and listening as she continues. "Totally understandable that yesterday wasn't a good fit, and thank you for thinking to call us in the given circumstances."

"Of course," says Will, dry as a bone. "I am not using that euphemistically, you know. She was left on my pullout bed in the middle of the night after a drunken blackout. Lost a fight with the courier, otherwise I would have sent her back to the sender."

"Of course," says the assistant with an airy acceptance that doesn't account for his admission of not thinking this is a blessing, even if he is coming around on that. "I'll speak to Mr. Warren to apprise him to your change in circumstances, but I need to stress how important it is that we schedule the deposition sooner rather than later," she says apologetically. "The faster we can include it in discovery, the better, and your contributions are paramount."

A pause, this time on Will's end.

In this moment, Will decides everyone is crazy. Verifiably. Way more than he's been, and that's with the known factor of advanced neurological disease. He was only suspicious before, but now he's certain. It feels good to land on this decision.

"Can't think of anything more important than that," says Will, only a little sarcastic. "If you can make a concession for having my daughter present for the deposition, and that I have yet to understand her cryptic needs, plan your time accordingly, I'll make every effort to be there."

The clicking of a keyboard from over the receiver. "Next Tuesday is ok?"

Will pinches his nose, and screws on the top of the bottle. The baby wiggles around for his efforts, and spits out her pacifier for a fifth time in as many minutes. "I don't know, I...guess? I don't think I'll have more than three hours of continuous sleep between now and then, but I can come in if that's what it takes to get it over with."

"Mr. Graham, I have been told to delete everything and anything on this calendar to ensure that you give your initial statement before 60 days pass from Hannibal Lecter's arrest. I will personally see to diaper changes if that's what it takes for you to come in and get Mr. Warren to stop stressing out about the defense's rebuttal to you, and yelling at the paralegals."

"Anticipating a blowout?" he snorts again.

She sighs, and doesn't say anything for a moment. "Trying to avoid a dismissal," she says, like she wants to be subtle. Will wants to chide her, tell her she shouldn't tell secrets he doesn't want to hear. He's more than a little afraid of the possibility himself - the erasure of his role in this play.

"If that's an issue during discovery or after in court, no one's really sure," she explains. "But Mr. Warren will know best."

A shrug on his end, hefting the baby's weight into a better hold. "Guess I shouldn't be throwing the stork thing around all willy nilly, should I?"

“Children are a blessing,” comes the easy, sweet reply. Another one for the stork defense committee, or whatever you call this mass ergot poisoning-esque delusion, the seventh so far.

Considering how bent out of shape people got over religious disagreements, politics, his career, and his generally scruffy appearance without provocation, he had anticipated at least a little push back on getting smashed alone, fighting a bird, and losing so badly it gave him the responsibility of parenthood to teach him a lesson. This isn’t exactly accurate, or what he tells the administrator, obviously, but when he breaks that night down to its most basic elements, it’s also not inaccurate.

In the end, Will has to do something. They agree on Tuesday at 10 o'clock in the morning, and he’s gently reminded he can only postpone one more time before he’ll be doing it with a baby *and* additional penalties. Behold, the justice of the court system, who is asking favors of him but is perfectly happy to put his hands to the fire if he doesn't.

He texts his own attorney to update them, and tries not to get angry. Beatrice is squirming again. The bottle is room temperature and ready to go.

(*You don’t have time to think of being dismissed. You have to find a way not to be. It’s a slap in the face if he does. It’s a slap in the face if he robs you of your agency again like that.*)

As is only appropriate for a child of Hannibal Lecter, additional food is in fact the answer this time, and at 9 am, Beatrice settles into a bottle with a kind of gluttonous enjoyment that Will is absolutely certain is him projecting. There is nothing in her that reads as psychopath, anti-social, aesthete, or cannibal. Newborns are not hedonists - they only know the joy of satisfying their needs, and their pursuits are simple, necessary, and soft-mouthed, unlike Will’s and unlike Hannibal’s.

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Thursday isn’t much of a day. He falls into the routine of eat, clean, sleep.

Eat, clean, sleep.

He remembers to feed his dogs. He remembers to confirm the appointment with the pediatrician. He rests enough to not feel seasick on dry land, and preps dog food in the afternoon hours while Beatrice kicks around in a cardboard box on the counter, propped up and filled with the currently clean blankets so that she can watch Will with slow blinks between naps.

Alana calls once. Jack does too, as does his lawyer and a couple of unknown numbers. Mr. Popular today, he thinks, stirring English peas and carrots with lamb meat into little plastic bags to freeze.

He's so tired - the kind that is a little sick to his stomach and shaky, but when he makes it back to the recliner to sit with his feet propped up and the baby in both hands, perched in the cradle of his arm at his side, he feels mostly content.

Will's sure it's bullshit to say he's experiencing some kind of paternal fulfillment, but it does heal him in some small monotonous way to have the routine and the company. Life is different without the appointments and the case work. He craves a routine just as much as the newly born, still learning what time is at all.

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Friday arrives with a remorseless spring drizzle, and Will, parking in front of the doctor's office with the trepidation that really should be reserved for imminent death, simply tries to fuss with Beatrice's socks in the back seat before heading into the lobby.

The receptionist smiles weirdly when they check in, and Will presumes she recognizes him. *Here's that weirdo from Tuesday*, she'll smile, handing over insurance forms and patient history printouts like she does for everyone else. *Here's that guy that obviously stole a baby and has made up some kind of fever dream excuse to cover it up.*

But Beatrice Graham is called into the back like all the other babies inevitably are, and a exam room with little happy blue jays and robins is what greets him instead of asylum staff

with a bite guard and straitjacket. The doctor is very generous with her time - Will takes it with the desperation of a teenager who's finally found a grownup that will listen to him.

The baby is perfectly healthy. She is a little colicky, but whatever wonder formula he's been given by the bird powers beyond is doing the job. She is 6 pounds and 4 ounces of squirming little girl. She is type AB blood, because of course she wouldn't have inherited Will's simpler biology. She is incredibly offended by the poke of a needle. She is undoubtedly his, though the phlebotomy nurse taking swabs from both squirming daughter and squirming father is very kind when putting samples together for paternity testing, like he's only crossing his t's and dotting his i's.

(*"I have the social and the birth certificate, but I'd like to establish custody just in case," you explain, and the Doctor nods gently.* )

He hates the idea of doing it, but the biological record feels every bit as important as the legal one, and Will Graham isn't exactly the type to fuck around on the specifics once he knows he needs them.

*I love my daughter*, he wants to tell the nurse and her gloved hands. *I would literally kill you to ensure that she has better than me, and if I thought this would hurt her in a lasting way, and if I thought you were doing something wrong*, says a hateful part of him.

(*Be careful - you sound like Hannibal.*)

Which of course raises the question of her other parent, as it always does.

There's hundreds and hundreds of cold cases jockeying for an opportunity to ask the same of Hannibal, to test his mettle and his ego with Roche machines. He's not the type to generally steal laurels from other killers, but he's also not the type to make it easy to confirm which is his or not.

Will can only imagine the indignity of subpoenas for swab upon swab upon swab, demanding him to reveal his genetic connection to the deaths of loved ones, hated relatives, indifferent absences. Most will be denied - Hannibal has always been immaculate in his forensic

cleanliness between crime scenes, leaving little to be confirmed or denied by his predator mouth. He's been wealthy his whole adult life - he has no doubt that his lawyer has smacked down 90% percent of the requests, and given only his most humble apologies for the 10% that make it through.

"Not to worry," Hannibal would say, crooked tooth caught on a lip, dry mouthed from sampling. "I keep an exceptionally clean house." He would smile at the implication of his prowess, at the implication that he could stir the interest of this many people. Everybody's death belongs to him until it pleases him to say it doesn't - nobody exempt. It's an immortality that will never be stripped from him. He is not ashamed of it, and holds it as a torch.

It's an option, he supposes, to ask for his own little piece of Hannibal Lecter. He could confirm it for himself that Beatrice is what she is. ***Order of Paternity,*** the document would scream, and Hannibal would have himself another laugh for the day in a series of laughs that legal procedure likely evokes in him, and probably consent to it because Will Graham asked for it, and what the novelty of that would be. "Let us see if Good Will is of sound mind to ask for this," he'd smile, and send the most disgustingly drenched sample he can, as wet as his mouth had been on Will's spine, taking bites at the soft flesh of his hips and the sides of his belly, because Hannibal Lecter only chews at the tenderest cuts.

(*You had bruises for two weeks. It's a mercy no one asks you to document your injuries from the Verger Farm - you don't know how you'd describe the obviousness of teeth in rings like promises. A token for every month you counted hours with his name in your mind.*)

Will, however, can't muster the nerve.

What if anyone found out? What if someone other than Hannibal Lecter and his no doubt worldly lawyer thinks he's crazy for asking, or worse yet, correct? Who of the hundreds asking for swabs will come to his house looking for some kind of recompense, when Hannibal himself can't be bothered to pay his debts of hunting in kind?

Will has no reputation left to salvage. Beatrice has nothing but reputation to build, and he worries at the guilt by association - neither of her parents is someone to be proud of. She's barely grown a tuft of hair. It's unthinkable that someone could look in her tiny round face and see Hannibal's sharp teeth, or Will's vicious, tearing hands, making animals of men.

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The weekend is long. Not because Beatrice is fussy, even if she has occasionally started to be so, but because the pattern they fall into gives Will room for dreams in a way that he hasn't had since the encephalitis. Some things feel more real than others.

(*It's almost a relief, her fussiness and wailing over small things. It's confirmation that she knows how to cry, how to want things, that she's a real person, even if she's small. There's so much that you don't understand about Hannibal, that you worry it will bleed over into her, but you've been startled to realize you love her so much that you can't conceive the thought of not loving her, even if it's the worst of things, even if she's as fathomlessly hungry as her other father.* )

Beatrice, after another feeding thirty minutes earlier, is comfortably sleeping in her bassinet, just within Will's reach at the side of the bed so that he can keep an eye on her. A dark grey fleece hems in the baby's legs to ward off the chill from a rainy day and night, and he watches with fascination when he sees her eyebrows pull together, some unknown trouble in her mind when he adjusts the edge of it.

Beneath that, Harley snores away, the most dedicated of the dogs to being a nanny and a general worry-wart at Will's hip. She follows him with the worried urgency of a mother, eyes dark and gleaming with every step Will makes around the house. She puts her snout to Beatrice's bundled body when she can reach - she watches the door and the edges of the bassinet when she can't. Will gives her a piece of jerky with her dinner tonight as a reward - he has never been so proud of the love his dogs pour out so freely.

He's read that babies don't really dream at this age. It seems like sound science, but Beatrice may have been secretly hatched somewhere before being brought to him for all he knows, so he tosses what he thinks he knows away and hopes that if she does, they are good dreams, and that the shell of her egg was pretty, maybe blue like a robin's is.

Will thinks the weird sleep schedule might be starting to get to him.

As good as confirmation of this - across the room, Abigail is pacing, looking young in the dim lights of the living room. Her feet are very careful around the dog beds, avoiding errant paws and tails. She was always thoughtful like that, though not from a wholesome place. Just trying to not leave tracks.

He hasn't thought of Abigail very much since Italy. This is healthy, he insists. It's not good carrying dead teenagers around in the theatre of the mind to force himself to be honest. The real one would have probably resented it. She never really did get to rest, even after death should have liberated her from Hannibal and Will's co-authored disaster of a dinner party.

(*And that's the trouble - you don't think it's particularly fair to her to be what you are now.*)

*(An actual father.*)

In the strewn detritus of burping cloths, half-full and washed bottles of formula, little blankets, big blankets, Will's socks, the hastily assembled diaper station atop the console table that used to be for books...a hundred little things that make up his life now, Will feels a vague guilt that it's Beatrice here instead of Abigail.

It would have been justice, for her to live again. If the stork has the gall to bring him an infant, why not an adolescent? Does he need a different animal to make the metaphor work? Should he go strike a stand of bamboo trees down and find her like a pearl in the trunk of one? He's sure he could find a story that makes her life real again.

Abigail stares into the electric glow of the space heater, and at the dogs.

"Not worth it," she says.

Will shrugs. "I have a baby because I needed to replace you...do you think that's not worth it?"

Abigail considers him for a moment. Will finds that he likes the confidence she has now, when there's no chance for him to hurt her. She will say the things that he should hear because they are the things he has been afraid to think out loud.

“I had a father that loved me,” Abigail says while turning a blanket in hand, twisting the weft of it with tight white fingers. She is dressed as she was the morning that Will first sees her - she had worn a cute sweater, something girlish. It had taken up blood into it like a sponge. “I didn’t need one to replace him,” she says, fingernails favoring the seamlines.

Will nods in understanding, looking back over to Beatrice.

“You just needed to be left alone,” he says, adjusting.

“You wanted to fix something to fix yourself, and he wanted to give you a project, not a person,” she adds, thoughtful. There’s no need to explain who the other in two is. (*There rarely is.)* “An *activity*. I don’t think it’s possible for it to end any other way that it is now, because I am between you, not a part of you.”

She shakes her head. “Or I was.”

That sits for a bit between them, hanging in the air as assuredly as rain. Will wants to refute it. He can’t.

She braids some hair between her fingers. She chews a thumbnail. She does things that older children do, when they’re not quite grown children. She was someone's baby once. Did Mrs. Hobbs feel her heart stir at the flutter of stork wings? Did she struggle to know where she fit in her daughter's life, even as the one that carried her like a sapling waiting to be planted? Will’s heart stirs for her and Abigail, but he knows it’s projection, a phantom of someone else’s memory.

“How did you get to be so smart?” Will asks, chest hurting when considering the blue of her eyes, the curve of her cheek.

“Not good parenting,” Abigail says with a snort, and sits down in the armchair with the frustrated grace of most teenagers, throwing her legs up and her head back dramatically. Will has to agree in this case - she was done forming into a person by the time he meets her. She was evolving into the kind she wanted to be by the time she died, and it wasn’t the kind he could have been happy with.

(*You don’t think you’d be happy with it for any daughter of yours, no matter your acceptance of that ugliness in you.*)

They sit together for a time, watching the baby take shallow breaths - reflexively scrunch her fingers together into little fists that hit no harder than the breaths. Abigail doesn't seem to mind it.

Will wonders if she would have liked to teach her how to use the fists, but she’s gone by the time Beatrice wakes for the 4 am feeding, and he doesn’t think he’ll see her again. It feels like a disservice to expect it, even if the brief company was nice. Needed. A bookmark being taken out, and a book being sat to the side.

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Beatrice is easy to strap to his chest with the sling that comes in the mail on Saturday for a Sunday morning walk. It’s been too long since the last time he took the dogs on a proper trip outside, and while he feels a bit like he’s wearing a baby bandolier with his sling, windbreaker, and a small bag with pre-warmed bottles and dog treats, it’s a return to normalcy that he needs after a long night.

She’s a good hiking companion, as are the dogs, dodging the edges of the creek on the edge of the property. She naps for the majority of the time, pleased with the steady beat of his feet to the ground, and settles easily when assured Will is with her when awake. The feeling is mutual, with the loose grasp of fingers on his thumb keeping him here, in Wolf Trap, crushing spring grass underfoot. He’s got that floating feeling again that accompanies jet lag the same way it does baby feedings - he could pretend he’s fresh off a case this way, that any time now someone will call him, and Will Graham, looking for utility, will answer the call.

Practically speaking, though, things are different. Regardless of the reason or machinations behind the baby or the morning, this walk will be followed with warming more formula,

another round of laundry, maybe a shower if he can get Beatrice to sleep in the car chair just outside the bathroom, just within eyeshot of the curtain. He will tickle feet, rest in the armchair with the baby's warm weight on his stomach, rinse her little head and body in a scrubbed kitchen sink because he can't keep putting it off out of fear of her size and her importance, erasing the thought of ears in the bottom of the basin and anything else that is dark and old with the memory of fall and winter. It's not strictly speaking what he was wanting a month before, but destiny or random acts of chance have never really done what Will thought they would do, even if he's a good gambler with things like emotion, motive, and behavior. As long as it remains uninterrupted, he sees a kind of happiness in this.

*Caution,* he thinks, stepping over puddles and large branches and the blooming Virginia bluebells cropping up from the treeline. *Very hostile with cubs. Unlike larger species to the north in the greater Baltimore area which predates on passers-by, this species is known to allow safe retreat. Avoid confrontation - retreat slowly down the path to escape without injury.*

He gives Beatrice a noisy kiss while she huffs and drowses in the fleece of the sling, and Will pretends to not know Tuesday is only two days away. Exactly the same as last week, and the week before that.

# raising well-adjusted and resilient kids through divorce or separation

Monday morning comes accompanied by three calls.

This is right, even if it is terrible, as the natural order of Mondays. Will bothers to answer them because he needs to go back to understanding what adults want from him, not just Beatrice. They are, to his dismay, nowhere near as straightforward as eating, sleeping, and being clean - all high priorities in the baby schedule.

While he could live without the polyphasic sleep cycle, Will has enjoyed this return to rustic living, where only cloth diapers, beef jerky, and the occasional step outside to get some fresh air matter. He has no need for visitations. He'd happily cast off the trappings of civilization and maybe take up whittling. Tying into this new aspiration, Will has contemplated moving somewhere even more rural to make it as hard as humanly possible to find him and Beatrice. He’s thinking maybe the Yukon, or northern Alaska.

Maybe Randall Tier was on to something. Maybe if he just starts wearing bear jaws recreationally, people will figure out that he would like to and should be left alone. Intruders who do not know how to self-sustain need not apply, and intruders that know how to self-sustain but only on human meat are advised that it is exceedingly poor hunting grounds and Will doesn’t keep anything but dried herbs in his spice cabinet, and all of them are at least half a decade old from when he bought the house in Wolf Trap.

(*No sense in throwing them out if you do decide to go to the middle of nowhere. You think that might stop Hannibal, but you’re not sure. Maybe if you only have a bottle of all-purpose seasoning and some generic vegetable oil.*)

The first call is simple - the U.S. Attorney’s office calls to confirm that Will is still available and able to attend his own deposition. It’s a very polite consideration, if a little desperate to stress the necessity of his presence. A lot of important people want to listen, because Hannibal Lecter is important, and Will isn't save this distinction, and Will had better fall in

line. Will, knowing that Hannibal is very self-important, and that he desperately wishes he could make him less important to himself, idly wonders if he could skip again.

Having anticipated this call, Will makes it a point to be awake at the approximate time the courts open for the day, with Loretta Lynn on the radio and both he and baby staring at the whiteness of the ceiling - her with glass bottle, warmed just shy of too much, and him with coffee, warmed to scalding. He's figured out how to prop her up with his shoulder and feed with one hand so that he can sip at his own drink, and everyone has a moment together in the morning glow before it can be interrupted.

"Yep," he says into the receiver. "Can't imagine a better way to spend a weekday with a newborn. Recording sensitive and formative memories with an entire counsel of strangers who won't understand the context, or care what it is when explained. Good times."

The assistant doesn't know how to reply.

He's always tried to be kind with public facing people - there's enough to worry about without adding himself to the mix. Will winces on her behalf and tells her to enjoy her day, and he'll see her tomorrow, assuming he doesn't flee the country for the Arctic Circle to herd reindeer or something. Surely he's not the only person seriously considering the remote places of the world over the criticism of modern society.

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The second time is Jack Crawford.

This call Will could do without, but he picks up out of habit when it buzzes in the pocket of his pajama pants, and swears a little to himself when he realizes the mistake.

He has an assortment of laundry in his hand while Beatrice makes bubbles with her spit in her sling by no real design, largely content despite the swaying between the washer and dryer. It is definitely the most single-parent moment Will has had so far, but life has turned into a series of opportunities to multi-task since his hangover and baby delivery, and he needs

something presentable for the lineup of lawyers and officials that will no doubt be judging him in advance of the actual judge and jury.

Will, having heard quite enough about duties to his fellow man, responsibility, and *making the right choice*, has tried to tune out Jack Crawford these days. He's been told some iteration of these obligations multiple times, and it almost inevitably ends up leaving him with the impression that he gets to carry the bulk of the work on what should have been a group project. As if Hannibal was just an unfortunate high school science fair experiment on the diet of a common wolf spider that was supposed to be harmless, instead of a repeating tragedy in both the forefront and background of Will's life.

(*The experiment metaphor, carried one step too far, concludes thusly: turns out Hannibal's actually a highly obsessive, venomous,* family-minded *of all things, radioactive brown recluse, and you accidentally broke his very nice display enclosure, and because Hannibal doesn't do things in half-measures in metaphor, you've been bit and are also now radioactive and apparently at least a tiny bit homosexual and family-minded, but you still have to do the cleanup like you're not half-spider yourself having a crisis of identity, attraction, and learning to rear children. Everyone cheers at you from a safe distance and tells you you're doing a great job. You decide you hate everyone, including the spider who just did what radioactive spiders do.*)

Will puts the phone to his face, and tries not to think much further into that. He understandably fails, shuffling Beatrice in the sling and determinedly not referring to her mentally as his brood. He really needs another nap.

"You going to tell me why you missed your deposition last week?" is the first thing out of the receiver, sounding gruff and disappointed.

"Hello, Jack," Will says, already exhausted by this conversation. "Was the suspense of not knowing if I ran off too much for you? Are the warrants in order for if I don't go tomorrow?"

A hum, somewhat forced.

"Not this time, but...you have a history."

Will hums in return, closing the dryer with a bit more force than necessary, earning him a squawk from the baby.

“I don’t know why you’re stressing about it," he says, more forcefully than is really polite. "You’re not even allowed to attend since we have mutual incidents to corroborate. As normal adults often have happen to them periodically in their life, I found myself unable to make the drive.”

“You don’t have normal things happen to you,” Jack retorts, but with better humor than Will probably deserves after four weeks of Will’s stony silence. “It’s never a cold or a dying aunt. It’s something exotic and worrisome, like neurological diseases, or bodies on your property. Do I have something to be worried about, Will?”

Technically, Will thinks, Jack is right. There *is* one additional body on the property. It is small, and precocious, and probably is going to be hungry in about 20 minutes. It kicks a foot out from the sling, with a bright green sock on its end.

Will smiles.

“You? No,” and he gives the foot a little soft pinch at the ankle to let her know he’s there and pushes it back into the sling. Beatrice watches from the opening of the fleece, trying to lift her head to watch him sort the remaining laundry by degrees of filth - baby spit-up truly is a powerful if subtle smell. “Me? Absolutely. Though maybe you can answer a question for me that I guess I just totally missed in onboarding at Quantico.”

Jack gets serious, not responding. Will is looking forward to seeing if he keeps that attitude.

He clears his throat, and pushes forward.

“Do storks work in any branch of American government?”

Jack still doesn't respond, but it's the telling quiet of confusion. Will is almost excited to be contradicted for the first time since the whole affair started, even if not to his benefit.

"...What?"

Will nods, relieved. "Do you know, as a ranking official of the US government, if storks are employed by the American people to distribute babies? I'm beginning to feel like I missed something crucial in civics class."

"I am too. That's absolutely ridiculous," Jack replies, like there's a smile in his voice. "Are you taking this case seriously at all, or did Hannibal saw too far into your skull after all?"

Will nods some more unseen, trying to ignore the saw comment, and the sensation of its burrs even with the anesthesia. (*How it rattled your head, how you felt the bone giving way, how steady that hand had been with the tool and you wanted to reach up to it and say "you don't have to eat that - there's nothing good up there, and you're careful with what you put in your body, right?"* )

"So then you agree, that my having a baby delivered by stork on a late Sunday night in March is patently stupid," Will adds, clearing his throat.

Another long pause.

"You have a baby?"

Will finds himself annoyed, but persistent. "Yes Jack, that's why I missed the deposition. Arrived Sunday night, by stork. County, state, and federally verified. I checked. Ridiculous, right?"

"That's…"

Will braces for it, that sweet, **sweet** verification that finally, for the first time in a while and despite several frantic calls and needling attempts to push the truth out there, he's right. This is abnormal. This is beautiful, and Beatrice is darling and he'll probably maim anyone who tries to take her from him, but distinctly abnormal, and he'd like to lodge a complaint with the county recorder for letting him have a week to embrace the delusion of Hannibal Lecter offering him a baby with the irreverence of a light snack as apology, instead of the world-shattering reality of fatherhood.

(*Motherhood, if the legal papers are to be believed, but you're still waiting on the doctor's office to confirm that. Seems like the kind of thing you should confirm instead of take at beaked face value.*)

"That's great, Will," says Jack, sounding a little awed. "I didn't take you for the kind, but that's really great."

There's a long pause. Will looks at Jack, and Jack looks at him.

Oh god, Will thinks. It's happening again. Jack's going to pan over this.

Jack does, in an endearing way. "You should tell Doctor Bloom," he says, like he is connecting the two of them for the first time, and Alana has not had him deliberately hung like a salami at least once. "I think she mentioned starting fertility treatments soon, and she could use a little support from one overwhelmed parent to another. Assuming you're overwhelmed," he amends. "I'd be overwhelmed."

Will laughs.

The farce continues another day.

"Alright, Jack," he says, looking down at his hands.

It’s easy to forget a lot of things - that they worked well with each other once. That he respected Jack’s opinion. Jack has forgotten that Will tried his best to share his, and that was a big thing to ask for, something that Will was afraid to do, and like a cornered animal, Will snapped and snapped and snapped until someone who wasn’t afraid of getting his teeth slid a hand into his scruff and pulled until he heeled.

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The third time he is called, it is 2 pm, and a small amount of sun is coming in through the windows to make a warm space to rest against the headboard. Beatrice’s fine hairs are filament bright with afternoon light, her little rounded arms relaxed and happy, and it feels a shame to pull his hand away to look at the phone again where it vibrates against his leg. It’s his lawyer, which is a shame as well.

This is maybe the one call he actually needs to have today, because the truth is Will has done as little as possible to prepare for his appointment to be deposed. Will really doesn’t have any time to waste on something that he thinks is going to be terrible by default, the same way that flossing the morning of your dental appointment is kind of like pissing into the wind. If he really wanted this to go well, he would have flossed for all the prior months, or in this case, he wouldn’t have tried to catfish a serial killer with serial killing, or circumvented a no-fly list by nautical travel, or tried to ever reconnect with Hannibal by blade, or bone saw, or desperate outpouring of shaking, tenebrous affection.

And this is only the first step - a basic recounting with the steady hiss of something recording in the background to remind him it’s scratching into stone somewhere, a first draft that he can’t actually change. He is orders of magnitude away from being able to have an easy cross examination. It will be a bloodbath while people watch the tape recorder, the lectern, the discomfort on his face, and he will be expected to say the right things in the right tone and not look at the defendant’s counsel table like it’s good to see each other again.

The phone rings for a moment, Will staring at it with dread.

He answers, Beatrice blinking in the yellow sun beneath his sternum, sleepy.

Mrs. Anita Fisher, his witness representation attorney at law, who comes highly recommended by Margot Verger via a politely worded letter, doesn’t seem to take much

offense to Will's foul attitude from their introduction onwards, to this moment now. This has generally been beneficial - Will has hardly been a good client, oscillating between blackout drunk and taciturnly sober.

He should probably send her some kind of wine basket if he manages to avoid going to prison.

Previously, Anita has tried to get Will to tell her an initial version of events. He gives her bullet points that amount to a brief summary, hardly anything to help him keep his story straight. ( *She asks you if you have things you'd prefer to avoid on the stand, and you laugh and say all of it. Mostly, you don't want to be there, watching the spectator benches gawk at you. You don't need to see how much you disgust them twice.* ) Today, she sees fit to inform him that she'll meet him outside the U.S. Attorney's office in Greenbelt, Maryland to report to the Major Crimes division. They will take his statements in a group conference over the course of several hours. She wants to bring sandwiches for the recess, and does Will like Coke or Pepsi better.

Will thanks her for the foresight and the small consideration. Lunch seems like something you don't ask Major Crimes for.

( *You laugh - Major Crimes, they say, a ragtag collection of offenses that range from domestic violence, to human trafficking, to mail theft and copyright violations, like Hannibal Lecter falls into a junk drawer of so many random acts of malice that it's easier to just charge him with everything all at once than to parse it out. "I'm here to testify about the healthcare fraud," you want to say. "I think he may have falsified some claims on my behalf to keep my brain cooking as long as possible. Not good to lift the lid too early, you know? Also ran my psychiatric care under the wrong code. I heard something about organ meat too - Europeans, am I right?"* )

"It's a little hard to see from the street," she explains. "But the bright side is no metered parking, and probably no news people."

"I'm bringing my daughter with me," says Will, giving a twisting half-smile to the receiver. "Only a week old, and I don't really have anyone to watch her, seeing as she wasn't planned or in any way announced beforehand," he explains, before tacking on a sensitive "and it's not against the rules. Having children at depositions. I looked."

He did - a Google search performed before the sun comes up, but after first breakfast, while the baby squirms and the dogs dance at his feet because breakfast is less of a time and more of a constant hope.

Anita only hums, and Will tries to picture her heart-shaped face and dark eyes, if they're warm now like the day she first took a look at him. Tries to decide if she thinks he's crazy on the porch of his house, tries to decide if the Verger money makes it worth the long muddy drive to Wolf Trap to find this moron drinking cheap shit from a chipped glass. (*You were sensitive then too - Margot's note in hand, and a perfectly professional woman rolling into your driveway with a no nonsense sedan, and two office boxes worth of files from your previous trial. "You're hard to contact, Mr. Graham," she wryly says, and you tell her that's on purpose.* ) She has the desire to do good tied with the skepticism of a previous public defender - Will finds he prefers her to the man defending him the first time.

She laughs. "Nope, it isn't. Not the first time it'll happen," she says, and unlike the officer on the way to Wal-Mart, Will understands that to mean that it's not the first time that she's had to run interference for children in court cases, not that she's accustomed to unexpected stork deliveries.

He makes small talk, about the week, about having a baby, about diaper changes being deceptively hard, about not being sure if he's doing the right thing, like testifying in a case against a known man-eater isn't a given. He thinks Anita must think he's sick. **He** thinks he is, and he's generally right, so...

But she's kind, and very patient. She recommends holding Beatrice sideways to help her sleep and work through the discomfort of colic. That worked on her babies. She doesn't make it feel stranger than it is, and for the first time in many years, Will wishes he had someone he knew closer to ask these awkward things about, to tell them there's been a mistake, that he should have never been given children, no matter how well intended or what bridges needed to be unburned. He's surprised to see 45 minutes roll by, and a few notes jotted down for tomorrow.

"I gotta tell you, Mr. Graham," says Anita towards the end of the call, "it's probably going to be unpleasant. Byron Metcalfe called me today to say he will be present, for the full duration."

Will, not understanding what that entails, and why anyone names their child Byron, gives her what he can only assume is a troubled pause. “Should I be familiar with the name?” he asks.

“That’s Lecter’s attorney, and he’s let me know he’s absolutely delighted to be able to attend.”

Ah.

“I see,” he says.

Will’s stomach drops a bit. Intellectually, he knows there’s a right to cross examine even during deposition, even if the deposition is less important than the trial testimony. He’s the lead canary in this coal mine - it only makes sense that Hannibal would want someone to participate, and that they would be delighted to do so.

“Then I guess I’m delighted to make his acquaintance,” says Will.

It’s not like he has much of a choice.

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He wakes Tuesday morning before Beatrice. He shaves. He combs his hair. He doesn’t bother with a tie for today, even if he is meeting Byron Metcalfe of many legal titles, distinctions, and majesties, because if he keeps this casual and unimportant, he thinks he can get through it without too much overthinking. He only has three ties, and he suspects he’ll need all of them for the actual testimony days.

A younger looking person gazes out of the mirror and the steam, someone who’s never met the defendant, or thought about running away to Italy with him, or conceived a baby via stork mail (*par avian, you laugh*) by non-traditional methods in the face of prevailing issues with same-sex adoption in the country, much less actual potentially genetic children. Will doesn’t recognize the face either, but he’s been told it might help to clean up. Maybe if he’s lucky

people won't put the scowling face from the tabloids together with this baggy-eyed pale fucker who has the look of someone who needs a fleece blanket and a long Sunday afternoon nap.

He gives the dogs their breakfast, and only shakes his head when the metallic clang of their mouths on the aluminum bowls signals how quickly and happily they eat. The neighbors promise to come by and let them out around lunch. He puts Beatrice in her coziest long sleeved cotton onesie and blankets in the car seat, and thinks as little about morning traffic as he can.

The roads are unmemorable between cities, no matter their many agency distinctions. Greenbelt is Quantico is Columbia is Bethesda, the only thing changing between them being the price of the houses. There are pretty lawns, and old trees, and the vague sense that standing near to either would garner him a police report. The baby is a disguise he's not had the pleasure of before - the promise of the nuclear household, if Will had ever been anything like an obedient partner, or reliable husband.

When he arrives in Greenbelt, Will's attorney thinks about none of these things, greeting Beatrice like they are old friends that have only been separated by circumstance, rubbing her cheeks between pinched thumb and index fingers.

"What a doll, what a honey," she says, and Will agrees.

They meet on the stairs in front of the cold-looking blue glass of the building before having to go inside, and Will is thankful for the pause. She coos at Beatrice's little socked feet, at the little plush headband that sits a bit crooked on her head, calls her "baby" in a way that makes Will flash back to aunties in the old neighborhoods in the South and miss his father. It's the kind of reaction that doesn't quite fit the reception of the child of Will Graham and Hannibal (*fucking redacted*) Lecter, but it's the one he wants and always wanted while he can still have it.

This deposition is all very formal - pinkies out, everyone severely frowning at the prospect of taking in Will's initial testimony before the trial, and very irate at having to reschedule it for a week later than planned. They really didn't have a choice - Will is one of the key witnesses, and the one that is best able to speak to Hannibal Lecter's character beyond the sparse forensics that exist for the deaths other than Abigail Hobbs and the men on the Verger Farm, and corroborate a number of troubling acts with Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom. He's

the only one that sees it all, like that's some kind of badge of honor, that he is oracular and cursed in his companionship at Hannibal's side.

Whatever Will's trial was like, it's increased by the fervor of gossip and shock here. Everybody who's anybody in Baltimore's social elite knows Hannibal Lecter, and even from the quiet of a cell, Hannibal must be preening at the attention.

Will is legally required to testify. Sent the fancy official summons, threats of warrants if he doesn't, even guaranteed immunity in the proceedings if he does so without complaint. It's a juicy story - highly-respected doctor, patron of the arts, libertine man going about town eating the rude of the Eastern seaboard for the better part of two decades, and also going so far as to meddle with government investigations directly. The State and the Feds are both absolutely foaming at the mouth for a successful prosecution. Jack Crawford is as proud as can be, on and off the news with sparse updates before the case proceeds. Will doesn't really think Jack has the right to take it as personally as he does, but when was the last time Jack really listened to him anyway?

(*He thinks you having a baby is great, so that's another strike against the logic of Jack Crawford, even ignoring the origin story. Imagine how apoplectic he would have been if you explained the frantic sex in the earliest hours of the morning, one eye always open for the U.S. Marshals, and the fervency of you and Hannibal wanting things to be different* ***actually*** *making things different.*)

So, barring being able to prove he's been married to Hannibal Lecter prior to his arrest, having some sort of medical hardship, and being able to shrug off his own exciting potential charges if he doesn't cooperate, Will's obligated to speak.

He's just not obligated to be very forthcoming either.

He's been rolling that around in his head all week and wondering if he's a bad (*worse than you thought*) person for even considering that. When he heads inside, Anita helping him with the front door so he can keep a hold of Beatrice's carrier, he wonders also if people can read that in his face, even if it is a cleanly shaven, younger looking one.

---

The first thing Will thinks when he's introduced to everyone in the bland conference room is that Byron Metcalfe has a very magazine-ready quality to him, enough so to overshadow the rest of the introductions.

His hair is a glossy brown with stately white streaks at the temples, a meticulously kept beard, and a grey suit with black shirt and tie that sits like a blank chalkboard in a classroom, waiting for writing. He keeps a shining fountain pen in the buttonhole. On closer inspection, he has a pleasant smile with exacting white teeth, and an easy drawling disposition that Will knows to be the kind to hide shrewdness. He recognizes it from the cue taking from obedient assistant clerks, the testing cut of eyes from him, to the baby carrier, to his lawyer who herself looks a little intimidated.

Will tries not to return it, staring at the scuffed point of his shoe from beneath his one good pair of hemmed trousers.

"Mr. Graham," he says, standing to introduce himself, one hand at his waist to ensure his suit jacket is buttoned, and the other grabbing firmly at Will's free hand. "A pleasure to meet you - I've heard quite a bit about you in the last few weeks."

Will, trying his best to balance with the baby carrier, considering if Byron Metcalfe is deliberately trying to pull him over with his forceful grip, decides to hate him on principle, and winces at the idea of their mutual acquaintance talking about him at all.

(*You feel a thrill at it too, like* ***he remembered, he remembered****. What's the story there?*)

"New baby, Mr. Graham?" asks Metcalfe.

Will keeps his face still. "As opposed to the old ones I keep on hand to call in sick and reschedule important legal procedurals?" he asks, still holding his own against the rigor of Metcalfe's handshake.

Metcalfe just shrugs, considering the star print on Beatrice's seat cover today with a polite, quizzical smile, but he does remain fixated all the same on the baby carrier, all the way up until Will checks on Beatrice and adjusts her blankets to not be so tight and begin the process of early-mid morning meal. "Didn't strike me as the type," Metcalfe says, "but then again, you change faces depending on who you're talking to, isn't that right, Mr. Graham?"

Will frowns this time, squinting over the top of his glasses.

Is Hannibal's version of events just that much different from Will's own? Or worse still, does Metcalfe think this is the equivalent to faking a limp to look more sympathetic? Did the multiple pictures of him in Tattlecrime with his gut ripped open and his body left exposed to Freddie Lounds' hateful camera not already do this? Oh no, Will Graham has to find a random baby to make him look more middle American, more relatable, because Will Graham is in all actuality a murdering bastard that is just overshadowed by a much more prolific murdering bastard.

(*That's true, actually. You don't have to admit it to anyone other than yourself, and the other murdering bastard who had you figured out on day one.*)

That's the angle, Will thinks with the surety of rain. That's the way the next months will paint him. There's no way to get Hannibal to look anything but absolutely mad as a hatter, but there are plenty of ways to make Will look like he's an unreliable narrator, and *that* casts a pall on anything he says.

(*It all comes full circle, that you are Cassandra, not Patroclus, in spite of anything whispered in the dark of Hannibal's house. "Have I missed the mark, or, like a true archer, do I strike my quarry?" thinks you, watching things fall apart in your driveway when Hannibal disappears into a police cruiser, handcuffed. Troy is burning, and there's nothing to show for it, only the pyrrhic victory of Achilles falling. "Or am I prophet of lies, a babbler from door to door?"*)

Will doesn't want to think what Hannibal has told this man about him. He doesn't want to think about what assumptions Metcalfe's already drawn to paint him crazier than he feels most days, how many ears he's bent talking about Will Graham, couldn't show up to his deposition as scheduled, couldn't get a babysitter, doesn't know how he got a baby to begin with.

What parts will he share with his staff, or the jurors in passing comments that will be stricken from the record on objection, but take root in their ears anyway? How much will he tell Hannibal when today is over? Same old shoes as his last time in court, Metcalfe will laugh, and wait until he tells all about Will's new accessory.

He covers Beatrice again with trembling hands.

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The book is warm under his hand. It is also without meaning.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth under pains and penalties of perjury?" asks the clerk for the prosecutor's office.

"I do," says Will, and that is without the weight of meaning either.

He rocks his foot under the table, slowly, to rock the baby carrier where the baby is down following her breakfast. She isn't likely to stay that way for the seven hours he has been allotted to tell his side of things, but he can try to at least get it started. With any luck, she'll get mad enough about the change in routine that Will can tip his hat, gather his child, and tell them all to soundly fuck off. *Keep it quick,* he'll say. *She's got a hell of a temper if the way her daddy displays his is any way to judge, and she eats every two to three hours, and all of you are candidates for the canapes if the princess doesn't get her way.*

He smiles to himself - it's not funny.

"Ok, Will, let's get this started," says the prosecutor. "We'll take this in chunks," he adds. "We all know there's a lot of ground to cover here. You will not be allowed to revise statements recorded today. Statements that you make now are not legally binding, but may be used to reinforce or contradict your testimony in court. Do you understand?"

“Yes,” he tersely replies. Will takes a breath, and holds it.

“Please state for the record your name, today’s date, and your relationship with the defendant, Hannibal Lecter.”

Now *that’s* a familiar theme. Here’s a joke no one will get, except one person listening to the recording from his lawyer’s next meeting with him in the federal penitentiary:

“My name is Will Graham,” Will laughs dryly, and recites: “It’s April 2nd. I’m in Greenbelt, Maryland in the U.S. Attorney’s office. The legal counsel for the prosecution, Mr. Adrian Warren, my attorney, Mrs. Anita Fisher, and legal counsel for the defense, Mr. Byron Metcalfe are here with me for the verbal deposition for discovery in the case of The People versus Doctor Hannibal Lecter.”

He’s sure Hannibal is pleased to be against The People, whoever they may be.

“And Doctor Lecter?”

Will hesitates at this, and tries to summon his voice and his ire.

(*That’s the man that did your mental evaluation with loaded dice. That’s the person that screwed your head on wrong, and filled it with dark things. That’s the person that shoved an ear down your throat, split you open like an overripe plum*.)

Will opens his mouth, and none of this comes out.

(*That’s your friend. That’s the only person that understands you. That’s the person that consigned his heart to you, and when that wasn’t enough, a living one to replace the others he had taken away. He couldn’t bring it by, so fate demanded it find another way. It is beating softly even now under the table, breathing around the fifth shape of pacifier you’ve tried in as many days. You gave it a bath this morning, and kissed its nose before it threw up on your clean outfit, and you just smiled and changed your shirt to one of the few clean ones you have*

*after a week of not really sleeping or doing laundry or thinking about what you are supposed to be doing right now.*)

His attorney frowns. “Take your time, Will.”

Mr. Metcalfe smiles a little meanly. “Are relationships typically this hard to define?”

Will keeps pushing softly at the baby seat with his foot, listening to it rock under the table. Beatrice is quiet, but everything inside Will is screaming. There’s just not enough time in the world to take. It’s not a simple question.

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They have to stop two times in the first four hours for reasons other than biological needs.

He runs the recorder through a solid five minutes of silence on the first question. He actually gets prompted by the prosecution to describe how they were introduced in lieu of making him answer with something easy like “he was my psychiatrist” to establish a doctor-patient relationship, or “he was an abuser disguised as a friend” because Will knows you can be both. He doesn’t think he particularly wants to hear about their tragic hate-fuck (*on your part*) before he’s arrested, which puts them somewhere between “frenemies with benefits” and “currently unamicably split parents via FBI raid.”

He goes for self-deprecating. “Well he was supposed to help with profiling and to have just done my initial psychiatric evaluation after the Hobbs case, but it turns out I’m more of a glutton for punishment than I thought and kept coming back to the office.”

He’s gently reminded by Anita not to interject too much of his personal feelings into the narrative on a break. Apparently, it’s a little too obvious that there are some unresolved, bitter feelings. Will thinks that should be expected, and everyone else can go fly a kite, but that’s not great if his testimony is called for review against his deposition, and he needs to think past the petty need to draw blood from anything he can claw into.

On the second time, he is too robotic with all his answers, trying to push through his discomfort the way he knows best, and while his voice gets louder with each probing inquiry because *can't these idiots hear*, Beatrice gets more and more fussy from the confines of her seat. He ends up holding her to stave off the inevitability of a temper tantrum (*both you and her*) but he feels self-conscious about her occasional outbursts on the tape that he starts hesitating to talk.

They break for lunch instead of watching him struggle to reply with more than the essentials to what should be rote, moral decisions and questions. Even Metcalfe lets him go without much comment when he rubs his jaw, absently using his smooth face like a worry stone, hauling the carrier and his bag out of the conference room.

"Sorry, sorry," he says, lifting Beatrice out of the chair to cradle in his neck, letting her stretch and eventually absently pull at Anita's long lariat necklaces while reviewing what they'll cover in the afternoon. Her nails are freshly clipped so she can't scratch, but she makes a dedicated effort.

It's warm enough outside to sit in the sun under the sparse canopy of trees, and with a strange sense of absence, he lets the attorney carry her outside, the first person to do so that isn't him or her pediatrician. It feels like a privilege that should have been saved, but who else does he really have? The sandwiches are good, though Beatrice is a fussy eater today, frowning with the kind of pug-like resentment of most newborns, crying unhappily between attempts to eat. He's not even the tiniest bit hungry, and anxious to run back to his car and throw up resentfully for having to be here.

He's always disliked Tuesdays.

Somewhere else, the dogs are being let out for a break and a handful of treats. Will's dad is probably getting a roast beef sandwich near the docks of the Georgia Port Authority. Alana likes to get Pad Thai near the campus on weekdays, and occasionally he'd join, but maybe an Alana living in the finery of the Vergers is no longer one that orders the #2 with a side of Tom Kha Gai. Jack is probably working through his hour-long break in his office, email inbox growing as a librarian's stack of books does. Hannibal is subject to the prison system's idea of what a chicken parmesan with noodles should be, and retreats to the beauty of a mind that has learned to cast aside things that don't please it.

(*You want to please, which means you want to be someone else. Right now, you can't even please the baby.*)

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It's getting a bit dark when Will walks outside a little bleary eyed and sad at the end of the deposition. He thinks he's earned that. The car is in his view, and he can finally be by himself with his equally irritable offspring. He doesn't really think he's earned the response that reality serves him in turn, but Jesus, isn't *that* the whole last year in a goddamn nutshell?

The click of a shutter lens. Heels clicking on the concrete stairs.

"Where'd you get the kid from, Graham?"

Will tries not to sigh noisily through his nose, but as the sound of the camera shutter becomes more persistent, so too does the pressure behind his eyes that make them pulse in time with his heart, and sighing is probably the only thing that Freddie Lounds will take more as an acknowledgement of existence and less of a threat.

(*Not a foregone conclusion. He can also hear "He sighed menacingly at me!" as clear as day in her stupid twit voice over a stupid twit hearing. God, they're going to put her on the stand for the whole "I lit a body on fire and pretended it was Freddie Lounds as an act of questionably amorous courtship" thing aren't they? Can he opt out? Can he just not be a person that day and go lay on the bed with Beatrice and forget about modern technology?*)

"I mean, you didn't strike me as a baby stealer," she continues, "but then again, I've seen people show up to court with walkers with tennis balls on the legs who had just been dancing the day before at a club, so I guess nothing's really off the table with you. Did you shave too?"

Will looks over at her, and tries to approximate his friendliest fuck off smile. He doesn't think he manages the friendly, but the fuck off seems to be shining through judging by the weird look on Freddie's face.

“Freddie,” he says, feeling the back of his teeth with his tongue, “to what do I owe the pleasure today?”

“Deposition pictures,” Freddie says, holding up the camera like kids hold up birthday presents, like a kitten or a poorly guarded secret that she’s just found lying around, and the way she puts the force on the ‘p’ in the word pictures makes Will want to *actually* kill her and set her on fire. “I’m going to be making bank on this entire catastrophe, and you looking like a widowed mistress is really just the best part of my day. How does anyone even let **you** have a baby, anyway?”

“Turns out birds are in charge of baby distribution and they’re not bothered by arrest records,” Will replies without thinking, used to this kind of absent condescension. He agrees a tiny bit, but on pain of death will never admit it to her.

There’s a weird look in Freddie’s face, like she’s a computer that stalled out, every bit as stupid as Will has occasionally supposed. For one glimmering moment, Will thinks that maybe, just maybe, someone is about to understand how absolutely bonkers it is for him to keep saying that. It physically hurts him inside to know it’s Freddie Lounds that’s going to do it, but after Jack going blank, he’s almost excited to be contradicted and be informed that it is, in fact, heterosexual coitus that traditionally leads to infants, medical intervention nonwithstanding, and certainly without assistance from swamp birds.

But just as quick as it appears, that smooth understanding descends on her pointy, fox face, and then she sneers at him. Will is both intrigued to document another example of the phenomena, but also feels like he’s having some kind of fever dream that everyone keeps indulging in the name of making him liable for testimony in court.

“Isn’t there any kind of civil injunction that keeps you from spawning with the general public? Who wants to make babies with you other than all the weirdos in prison?” she asks.

(*Who indeed, you sigh.*)

(*But also, too close to the truth. Much too close.*)

“It turns out at least one weirdo would like to share a family tree,” Will snaps, looking down to make sure Beatrice is properly covered. “Against all odds, courtesy of your fantastic running essays on my general undesirability.”

“Very specific undesirability, actually. I guess there’s someone for everyone,” Freddie adds blithely, smiling, snapping another picture of what Will has no doubt is him showing his teeth like a dog, holding the carrier like it’s full of golden eggs.

She puts the camera down, face going smooth again, considering. “And I’m going to find out who’s yours.”

---

Will would like to pretend he doesn’t panic the whole way home, leaving Freddie at the stairs of the office building like the nuisance that she is.

He is crisp as lettuce, crunchy as croutons. He is a veritable salad of peace and prosperity, and dammit, he is pretty sure he is actively having some sort of mental blowout from Arlington all the way to the exit for his rural gravel road. His brain is going to melt out the backside of his head like the Elephant’s Foot in Chernobyl from the force of his thoughts whirring between the deposition and the implications of giving one, but he’s a father now, and none of this is supposed to show in his face, and he’s glad Beatrice is probably not capable of seeing more clearly than the late night porn channels on a broken cathode TV with rabbit ear antenna. It’s going to be a struggle to contain his multitudes of strangeness when she’s big enough to recognize it.

Beatrice smacks her lips around the pacifier in the back seat, foot bouncing in the rearview mirror. Will grits his teeth at himself, and tries to mind the speed limit. Volvo’s are supposed to be good family cars, right?

(*Add to shopping list: one “Baby on Board” sticker, to test if it exempts you from basic driving rules like it seems to do with everyone else who has ever dared to make children like it wasn’t a terrifying attempt to play at being God. Stop signs are for lesser people. Turning on the blinkers to merge is for people with time. You have about a ten minute window to*

*bathe, and a five minute window to have a complete emotional breakdown, and you don't intend to waste it on roadway courtesies.*)

Watching the trees whir past on the drive, Will has to be fair with himself and not bury his head to his current reality. People like Freddie Lounds are an inevitability. People like Byron Metcalfe that see more than they ought to and misunderstand it are also inevitable. Between the lawyers, the tabloids, and his inability to maintain any sort of privacy after the FBI and Hannibal had seen fit to drag all of his proverbial dirty laundry across the yard, it's funny in hindsight to think he was ever going to be able to keep this private. The baby is as good as a neon sign pointing **HERE!** to his vulnerability, to his publicly regrettable dark affair that summarily ended his career.

Beatrice falls asleep approximately five minutes before their arrival home, comforted by the jostling of the car and the low hum of the engine. She is primed for good, pitiful bawling when he takes her out, frustrated to be woken up, frustrated to be removed from her seat, and entirely unhappy to be bathed in the kitchen while Will chews a handful of trail mix between rinsing soap from the crown of her head and drying it.

"I know," he says around the lump in his throat, and contemplates if it's worth crying too. They do everything else together, so why not this?

He wipes her wet face with a soft yellow swaddle, and apologizes for the cold air of the house when he brings it to his own face before wrapping her up. It's not any more damp than the beads of water from the bath make it, but he still feels guilty, and replaces it within the hour.

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Late nights are as good a time as any other for blearily staring at greeting cards in the half-light of the kitchen, with nothing but the stove vent lamps to guide him.

Mind you, said card has sat deliberately forgotten for a week now, regardless of the peripheral visibility, but as obvious as a low moon in the evening. It has taken diligent effort to not pay attention to it. Will, never one to give up an opportunity to ignore something uncomfortable about himself, thinks he's been doing a great job.

Now at the radio talk show hours of the evening when he should be trying to rest, the hard formica of the countertop is an unremarkable beige in the dark, and the lavender of the greeting card's envelope against it is almost offensive, more like an Easter egg than a missive meant to communicate with other people. Now, the baby spoon and the sparkling tablecloth on the front of the card are stupid instead of ironic. The emptiness of its interior is pointed.

Will has half a mind to throw it away and just draw something crude on a piece of blank white lined paper instead of this farce of a card, or continue to say nothing at all to Hannibal, but over and over he can see Freddie Lounds' smug face and the incoming digital pictures of him with a baby carrier on Tattlecrime, looking pole-axed and sad. The idea of *better from me than her* rings in Will's head like a death knell, and what is Hannibal possibly going to be able to do from prison anyway?

(*"Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me," says Hannibal, and you, born discourteous, shrink away a little and wonder if that's it, if that's why you're fixed in his gaze, something to be reprimanded instead of quickly dispatched, so numerous your sins and he can see every one of them.*)

He writes, after a moment's consideration in his stilted chicken scratch letters:

***What do you know about storks?***

Will contemplates that for a moment.

It looks as dumb as the question sounds in his head. He has half a mind to find the drying bottle of white-out in his limited office supplies and start over.

(*You, an unforgiving grader of academy papers, occasionally need to redact the sharper thoughts you have on people's spelling, grammar, and overall logic - you need the job, and people are surprisingly sensitive about it. You used to spill red ink on student essays like butchers spill pig's blood, and paint on acrylic to hide your meaner impulses. Now you have to hide a soft one from someone who takes to finding things you'd rather hide like he means to steal it. No mistake left unturned, no nasty thought left unappraised.*)

Maybe he should just buy a different card. Maybe something *With Sympathies* , or *Thinking of You* . What kind of first contact after a month long vigil of silence is this anyway, and honestly, how would Hannibal even reply? ***I had hoped you'd have something more poignant to break rank with the FBI over***, comes to mind. ***Have you taken up birdwatching to relax, Will? Very suburban unmarried white male of you. Please let me know if you begin live streaming how to identify shoreline freshwater birds or hummingbird feeders - the warden would likely think it's therapeutic for me***, is another.

What if he really doesn't recognize Beatrice as a possibility? What if he doesn't care?

It makes Will cringe to imagine Hannibal Lecter, an M.D. twice over, polymath and polyglot, authority on all things obscure and unnecessary for anything other than playing Pictionary with people's bodies, getting the stupid blank faced look that everyone else seems to get when he's trying to explain where this baby came from. How awful it would be to not be understood by Hannibal, after all the things he's done to be seen in his entirety and vice versa.

That he wouldn't know Beatrice from any infant taken from a maternity ward.

(*He didn't really care about Abigail. Why would he care about* ***this*** *daughter?*)

Will clicks the pen open and closed, open and closed.

The card is mercilessly white around his writing. It feels a little anemic to not add something else, but really, what else should he add? ***Sorry I couldn't call you to arrange a baby shower - I wasn't really expecting that I should arrange one to begin with. Your taste in names is a little old-fashioned. I resent having to change all the diapers and do all the midnight feedings, but I guess you resent having to piss where someone can see, and there's no claret with dinner. Sucks doesn't it?***

Should he put a fucking heart next to his name? He wasn't even *going to* write his name to begin with. He doesn't know what he was planning at all.

Will doesn't write anything else in the card. He *does* have a dram of whiskey that makes it hard to wake up for the early morning hour necessities, but Beatrice doesn't know a hangover from a bad night of sleep, so what difference does it really make?

*(You will remember this as a bad decision later - not from the throbbing ache of your head, but the disappointment in yourself, something you saw over and over again in your own childhood coming back to sit in your own home, on your own couch.*)

At 4 am when he wakes up again, he shoves the card into the purple envelope, seals the cheap adhesive with a sore lick of his tongue, and leaves it unmarked on the exterior. He shoves *that* into a manila envelope, and addresses it:

***From: W. Graham***

***To: Byron Metcalfe, Esq., Asshole in Chief***

***Metcalfe & Associates, Attorneys at Law***

***1000 Lancaster St.***

***Baltimore, MD 21231***

With that, a small slip of printer paper around the exterior of the greeting card, with a scrawled addition:

***Your call, bud.***

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What goes with the postman Wednesday morning is simple, discreet, and a terrible idea. He walks it down the gravel path before the sun is fully up. He watches the white truck rumble down the road at the end of the driveway with a detached absence, baby under the fold of his cardigan, complaining into his collar for his attention. The truck stops at the mailbox. They take the contents, and leave some behind. It's kind of a relief to see it all disappear down the

road - out of his hands. He probably has until about Friday to make up his mind before Byron Metcalfe calls to snidely inform him to not try contacting them again outside the approved channels for witnesses, which would be the smart thing. Will is counting on other people to do the smart thing - he clearly can't.

In the mail they get for the day, there's a series of bills, some ungentle inquiries from local reporters that haven't had any luck via email, a giant mass of flyers from the county public programs advertising activities and seminars for new parents, and the genetic test from the doctor's office. He rips this last one open.

Against science, nature, and probability, it's positive for a match between them.

So that's a plus.

Something in his chest is warm and proud at the DNA profile, and her name in no nonsense terms in conjunction with his, not bestowed in the middle of the night by creatures unknown. This came from the mailman, which is as solidly normal as a flyer of coupons. If it were possible that someone's orchestrating a long, drawn out prank, the volume of people Will interacts with decreases the odds of that each day.

"Too bad, Bea!" he says to her lolling head on the bed. He thinks he's happy. "Looks like you'll have to keep me. You're too young to decline the honor, but I'll try to make it up to you someday." She just kicks around some more, a fist flexing around the pacifier clip's dog ears, while Harley wags her tail from the side of the mattress and noses at her full belly when she tips too far to the left.

Will admires her obliviousness, and regrets not being able to partake. He contemplates the Yukon again, where he wouldn't have to see any of this shit through. He'd make a great lumberjack. Awesome fishing, no journalists. Homeschooling might be a bit of a bitch, and Will Graham socializing a girl for healthy human interaction is probably not very easy in the absence of humans, but it's not the worst thing that could happen to her development he supposes.

(*Consider the possibility of genetic predisposition to being a social fuckup by default like you. Consider the possibility of genetic predisposition to being a sociopath by default like Hannibal. Actually don't - it makes you nervous that fate has taken away your decision to*

*never procreate. It makes you nervous that everything bad about you and him is waiting in the wings to take your happiness away through her.*)

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Local mail goes from postal carrier to postal hub to sorting machine. A tired clerk moves bags and bags to the freight truck. The contents are spilled onto conveyer belts to find their new routes. This takes two days.

Sorting machine to city hub, to neighborhood carrier. The carrier has been the same carrier for the block for 15 years. A dozen or so manila envelopes go to the suite of offices to sit on the front office assistant's desk. The carrier waves, and is waved back to, a regular around 10 am every morning. This takes one day.

The front office assistant steps away to check for a new ream of printer paper, but somebody else steps in. A pen knife slides one envelope open neatly, and hand pulls the contents out and lights a flashlight to try and examine the sealed contents within. No luck - too opaque and purple. But how strange, that exterior note is, and they snap a quick picture with a phone. They're forced to seal it back up and set it down when the assistant comes back, heels clicking loudly with each step. This takes less than five minutes.

# how not to f*** them up

By Friday afternoon there's a shiny new article on the front page of Tattlecrime, that probably only barely makes the word count requirements to count as news. Freddie doesn't waste much time, though she clearly wanted a juicier article than she actually has.

With Beatrice at his feet, sitting more or less content with the subtle rocking motion, Will physically flips off the image of Freddie's author profile in the lower right hand of the menu when he opens to the page on his laptop out of morbid curiosity. It feels good, if a bit useless - she'd hardly be bothered by it in person, much less where none save the dogs can see. He's thankful for an ad-blocker to help him add insult to injury. Appropriately, there's additional bird references in the header of the article, but nothing pertaining to the stork.

***One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest: How Will Graham Is Playing Mother Goose***

*Posted by Freddie Lounds, Admin*

***Will Graham not only was a day late and a dollar short on his deposition day in the Hannibal Lecter federal case, he was seven days late. That's a new one for aiding and abetting, folks, but get this... The reason? Baby duty.***

Because Freddie is incapable of subtlety, here Will finds a photo of himself looking particularly tired coming out of the office building on Tuesday evening. Beatrice's carrier looks absurdly large in his hand, and he, clean-shaven for the first time in years, looking very much like he just failed a series of college exams and might take up escorting if the forensics don't work out. The caption beneath reads: "Did he steal it?"

(*She was gifted to you against your will, thank you very much. You protested, attempted to return her to the authorities, and every other responsible adult you thought might be able to realize birds are shit at recognizing strong paternal qualities. Turns out legal custody, once gained, is actually pretty hard to shake off.*)

Rocking the carrier with his bare foot, Will continues.

***You got that right, folks. Will Graham, criminal profiler and potential criminal himself, has a baby. Our sources tell us against all odds that the baby is his, but how he came to have one on such short notice and with who is anyone's guess.***

Will doesn't think that's entirely fair - he told her directly how Beatrice arrived. Did she just totally miss an awesome opportunity to roast Will's mental fortitude, or is that weird stork energy causing amnesia in addition to the seeming acceptance of the stork as a method of natal delivery?

***What we do guess is that Graham is likely using his newfound parenthood as a tool to manipulate the prosecution into a more sympathetic view of his involvement in the FBI entrapment scheme, desecration of a body with Lecter, vigilante justice in Italy, and his nebulous presence in the Verger Farm massacre. Our followers may recall Graham's own stint in the clink following the disappearance of Abigail Hobbes, where he would later be acquitted - funny how he ran straight back to the man who set him up. Quite the resume he has there, and we'd posit poor judgment as well.***

***Now the question we have is if Baby Graham is going to make a debut in front of jurors, or is Daddy Graham just hamming it up for the press and the lawyers? We'll be on the lookout for more details as we get closer to the court dates, dear readers.***

There's a small gallery of pictures, a few from the lunch where Beatrice is fortunately more giant hair bow than baby, and several iterations of her article cover with Will's face growing more and more irate as time passes. It's a pretty accurate depiction of what his face usually does when Freddie's involved in anything, or a camera for that matter. He's never met a more unphotogenic person ever, and he sends a little prayer into the universe that Bea can be more like Daddy #2 in this department.

He takes away two things from the article. One, she doesn't have anything on him yet. There's nothing to suggest she's found anything more substantial than her own run-in with him on Tuesday, or that she called and confirmed that he hadn't stolen a baby. (*To which you would rebut - why? For the joy of never being clean or well rested again?*) Two, if Freddie Lounds never refers to him as Daddy Graham ever again, it will still be one time too many.

*Much ado about nothing you can see, Freddie*, he thinks.

Beatrice spits her pacifier out and cries about it. This is now a routine. As an accompaniment to it, Will puts it back in, and browses back to weather reports for the weekend, a shopping list including dog food and some canned goods for him, and reading guides on what the hell he's supposed to do next. Tattlecrime, trials, and unflattering supposition alike, child development marches on, and he's thankful for something to cling to.

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His first caller to his home that is not directly involved in the delivery of babies and baby paraphernalia since Bea's arrival is a surprise that he's not sure he appreciates.

Margot Verger rolls into the drive on Saturday after the deposition, looking glossy in her makeup and vaguely feral in an emerald silk blouse and black tapered pants, heels of her shoes getting caught in the small pea gravel of the road. She has a new car - something big and black and chromed all over that would be very difficult to push off the road with just any vehicle. She has to hop out of it, too small to look anything other than childish next to its mass, but she's secure, nestled in the bulk of steel and leather interior.

(*You suppose with money it's easier to rely on external things to protect you. Shoes that last a few years, houses to shelter, food to eat in times of hardship, and now gargantuan custom SUVs to ensure your brother can't try to take something else vital. Mason's dead, but the impulse remains - you sympathize with that, even if you don't know if you'll ever have enough money-influence-desire to build the kind of armor that keeps someone like* ***you*** *safe.*)

"I expected Alana," says Will, walking down from the stairs of the porch with baby in hand, a soft fleece thrown over his shoulder to cradle her head and his hair unbrushed in probably as many days as it's been since his trip to the U.S. attorney's office. Beatrice is having none of it, and fists little handfuls of t-shirt and blanket between her fingers while fretting at the interruption to her nap. "Jack was quite particular that I call her."

Margot smiles, but her eyes are stuck to Beatrice, the anomaly in the room. "The rumor mill spun me a yarn before it got to her. Mrs. Fisher was very complimentary of your child rearing - less complimentary of your prospective testimony giving." She looks at him a moment longer. "You look like shit."

Will smiles a little in return, hefting his load with a snort at her half-hearted wail of indignation. Or existential dread. Whatever she feels two weeks into spawning into existence. (*You assume there's some mild personality development going on there. God knows she normally has the internal clock of a German train conductor, and the easy disposition of a Brit on holiday.*)

He shakes his head. "If you and Alana are going forward with getting pregnant like Jack implied, then you too can own this spectacular look," he says and gives his face a hand wave. "You've caught us at the beginning of mid-afternoon nap, the least liked of the bunch."

"What's her name?" asks Margot, looking wistful but wary. She has the particular longing in her face that Will ascribes to wanting to hold the baby but also being afraid of her - it's a strange need that rises in perfect strangers he meets at the grocery store and at the gas station, something that terrifies and charms him. He feels not unlike one of the dogs with a bone, trying to hide her sometimes. It's selfish of him.

"Bea. Or Beatrice, if we're being formal I guess."

She nods, like this is very logical and appropriate, but still has a somewhat needful energy to her. "Not your first choice?" she asks.

"Probably not even on my list." Will shrugs. "I've been informed in multiple points of my life that compromise is key in relationships, and in the absence of being able to dissent to it, I'm going to chalk this one up as one."

Margot smiles, eyes very glassy and glittering. For not the first time, he thinks she belongs on a poster, or in a magazine, not in Will's driveway. "Alana got to pick the baby room theme out in exchange for having to get the old turkey baster treatment."

"I'm happy you were able to find a donor that you liked," says Will, nodding seriously. "I'm sure they have a better track record than me. I hope it's enough to help you keep your home."

Margot's face does something strange, a shuttering like lights turned on and off rapidly, and he's half-light blinded in the dark.

"That was a compromise too, though I think for everyone," she says absently, in that airy voice she saves for half-truths. "But it gets the job done."

(*You didn't recognize them for that at the time, those little half-truths - she told so many of them that you interpreted  it as part of her personality rather than a dedicated assault on the world with carefully decorated statements. She must have been one of Hannibal's favorite patients, moral enough to evade his temptations, amoral enough to sidestep what she should do instead. You think she might have been one of your favorites too, in a world where you and her shared children and she kept her womb - not you and Hannibal by means of otherworldly biology.*)

Will considers that through a benign smile, the one that he learned from watching Hannibal puzzle through something.

(*Turns out you might unintentionally like sharing with liars. Children, drinks, desperate fitful passions, whatever you can stumble your way into and hope for plausible deniability. You suspect they know you're a liar too, and that makes it easier to slide into that skin.*)

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He invites her in for a drink, because she has made a relatively long drive to verify that Will Graham has dared to go on and have a child without her, but also because despite the recent peril to his face, his life, and skincare routine delivered by the doughy hands of Cordell Doemling thanks to Margot deciding to integrate him into her trauma, he likes her. She takes some sort of hateful agency in her life that he feels kin to. Were it not for Beatrice, he suspects he would have worn something similar as a cloak of his own.

"How, exactly, did you come to have your new roommate?" asks Margot, pacing a bit in the empty spaces of the living room, holding a rocks glass with an especially ice-cube filled whiskey.

She narrowly avoids the hope chest, more floating around the corner of it than actually walking or touching it.  As to how she manages it, Will can hardly imagine considering his own killing field of a foot after a week with it under foot and near to his knees. He wishes her well in this evasion, saying a prayer for her unstubbed toes and unbruised legs.

Will also wishes he had his own whiskey. *Every* time he tells this story he wishes he had one. The fact that the baby is fighting the need to go back to sleep doesn't help. So he just dives into it, as he's getting in the habit of doing:

"A bird informed me I was a mother in legal terms, bestowed Bea to me in something that looks like it was made in the old country, and sent me its idea of necessities for first-time parent items," he explains like that makes any sort of sense.

And maybe it does - Margot seems to hem and haw over that statement for a moment, narrowly avoiding the sharp corners of the chest but miraculously holding her ground. He can't quite see her face to see if she thinks that's as stupid as it is, but she pauses for an uncomfortable amount of time before resuming her pacing, and turning to him with a coy look.

"Had I known *you* were open to doing the mothering, I might have gone about things differently when we tried our hand at it. Less risk to my bodily autonomy and all that - since you seem to have a loose grip on the concept."

Will frowns at the backhandedness of that, and adjusts his grip, free hand rubbing down the baby's back - she hiccups into his shoulder. "Ah yes, bodily autonomy and me seem to have had a falling out around the time I met Hannibal. To be fair, Margot, you didn't seem to give me much of it last year either."

Margot shrugs, hair falling over her shoulder. "You seem to have gotten a pass at a baby both times thanks to it - I was just quicker."

Will pauses at that, turns it over in his mouth like it's hot, even if his body feels cold. When he looks at Margot, she's as infallibly smooth as she always is.

Beatrice must pick up something of his anxiety. Where she had previously been content to simply resist attempts to be put back to sleep, she now actively wails, and Will takes that anxiety and pushes it somewhere full of white noise to solve later.

There's something about the rare occasion that she is frustrated to the point of crying that fills him with a passive guilt, like he's misunderstood or done something wrong, and now there's an embarrassment that he hasn't felt previously with people in the room to witness it. Will Graham shouldn't have a baby - look how much he's fucking it up. He can read everyone except the person he needs to most - her absence of experience is a void in his vision.

(*It's been so long since you were alone in your own head, you don't know what it would like to be new and empty.*)

Margot's, however, isn't. Will can see it all, the way he's seen her scars and she's scratched at his to ensure they were real. There's something akin to resentment in her face, watching him try to shush Beatrice, and Will can't really say she shouldn't feel that way. She goes from shelter to shelter to shelter looking for validation of her personhood, of her right to be happy and healthy, and here he is, with the thing she can't have of her own body, by no real effort of his own by means of the man that set in motion her devastation, and he's not even doing it right.

(*You didn't carry Beatrice inside you, though you guess the hooked knife in Hannibal's hand to carve you open was something like birthing her, and she just had to form outside of you, deliver herself in a reality outside of you, because you can't conceive of a world where she's allowed. From the privileged position of overcoming that and now watching someone else who can't conceive, you know that's cruel.*)

He's angry, he realizes, and he's tired and unable to express adequately that he's sorry, he doesn't deserve it, it should have been someone else.

"So what, I owe a debt of gratitude to the universe for validating yet another person's success at pushing fatherhood on me without consulting me first?" Will wryly replies, switching arms when Beatrice continues to unhappily wail, and nods in her direction. "I might have declined given the option."

(*You wouldn't. You're exhausted, lonely, worried, but it's still better.)*

Margot seems to think this is funny, though she does look a little bewildered with each time the baby cries. She wanders, somewhat awkwardly when her heels click loudly on the wood of the floor, considering the contents of the house. Her hands pass over swaddles, and the collection of bottles on the counter, and the rare few plush toys intermingled with the pet toys. She's good at obfusticating - she only likes to talk directly when she's ready to cut.

"You have a kind heart," she says, picking up one of the empty bottles from the kitchen counter. "You're not really in the habit of declining gifts, or declining to give them. I guess it's fair if you were permitted the option to not accept what was actually being offered, you might have." There's a long time that she just looks at the general state of the room, at the dogs milling around, at Will looking worn at the edges and the thoughtless unhappiness of the baby. "Here you are with another gift though...Be careful who figures out who gave you this one."

They just look at each other. Will tries to not be obvious, but he's not sure what that looks like, or how to avoid it.

"A lesson we both shared," says Will, delicately. He frowns, and peers closer, anxious at the implications. It's been easy to forget she's sharp too, an animal made wary and watchful. "Why are you really here, Margot?"

"Both the lesson and the impending legal bullshit that our mutual acquaintance brings with him...who I'm very invested in seeing go to prison for Mason and the rest. I'm working on being a new mother too, thanks to his advice," she says sugar sweet, but she sighs after a moment. It's rough being a threat - even Will hasn't figured out entirely how to do it without emotion getting in the way. "Don't give me a reason to act outside your interests, and I won't have a reason to share some speculation on our common denominator."

Will gives a shocked laugh, breathless. "It would certainly be quite the thing to speculate. Think that particular mudslinging will stick?"

Margot smiles. "I didn't get to keep my baby because he was jealous that it was also your baby. Can't imagine a better candidate to speculate wanting to replace it."

And there it is, in the open. He appreciates that about Margot - that she doesn't really beat around the bush beyond the sexual kind if her assertions are true.

“So don’t fuck up at the testimony is what you’re saying.” Will says with a heavy sigh of his own, walking to the kitchen to begin the ritual of a new bottle of formula.

“Pretty please,” she says, and drains her glass.

Margot knows. That feels fair, even if it’s terrifying.

(*After all, she had a child by you once before it was taken away. You have a child by someone else now, and it’s only right she get the chance to poke at that particular wound somewhere private before other people do.*)

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It feels like it’s been winter forever. When the grass outside the house starts churning up clovers and yellow wood sorrels, drying up the last of the snow, Will decides on Monday morning that the two of them could probably stand a little direct sunlight.

The dogs chase each other around the yard, patrolling the edges of the field, nipping at each other’s tails and feet. Beatrice is quiet in her bonnet, sleeping in the car seat again next to him where he can watch her. He probably ought to consider something a little more comfortable for casual time at home - surely there’s a lounge chair equivalent for very tiny children. God knows there was an equivalent for everything else, but she looks very satisfied underneath the visor, insofar as a person with no eyebrows or facial control yet can look.

(*Logically, you know that smiles given by her are unintentional reflexive ones until four to six weeks old - you still find yourself smiling back when they make a rare appearance.*)

Will has to remind himself to not fuss with her or she’ll always expect to be fussed with, putting his hand down to lay open behind his head instead of to move the collar of a blue

onesie away from her neck. (*Do babies like to flip the first snap open the way you like to leave the first two buttons open on a shirt? These are the important questions.*) In the two weeks that they've been in each other's company, he's gotten so attuned to checking on her that it feels forbidden for them both to rest out in the open like this, no obligations elsewhere.

Well, he has them - he's just also gotten into the habit of ignoring them.

Life without a job is really quite wonderful. Will has considered off and on how long he'll be able to pull it off, with the legal department at Quantico and the FBI tendering an exorbitant amount of worker's compensation and paid leave. If they weren't suspicious that Will would sue them into prehistoric layers of the ground for the wrongful imprisonment and damages, he suspects he would have been asked for a class syllabus by now or to resign. With the trial about to take up another large chunk of time, Will thinks he might be able to squeeze out one more semester of staying at home. He'll have his first Christmas with a very small family of his own before going back to work - it's weird to think about.

That is assuming that testimonial immunity thing is real, and Margot holds up her end of their gentleman's agreement, and assuming he can lie his way through that in a way that makes it Hannibal's fault. The death of Randall Tier is arguably self-defense, but the creative modifications made to his corpse certainly weren't, and the "but I did it for the entrapment!" angle doesn't quite work out when that's also very illegal. Kade Purnell must be absolutely rolling in her sleep nightly thinking about what Jack and Will got up to in the last year.

It's not really fair to blame Hannibal for any of that - Will enjoyed it. He'd probably do it again.

(*It's easier to say it outside of the house, on the lawn, in the sun with no one but your dogs and your daughter that hasn't figured out language or telepathy to witness it. Maybe it's like being an alcoholic - confess it enough times that you wear it as a feature instead of a bug. Hello, your name is Will Graham, and you enjoyed butchering that man because it was justice, and it was validating, and a person you don't respect but you do admire told you it was lovely.*)

So put that down for the rare "my fault, not his," as well as the reasons why birds are shit at picking legal guardians for babies.

Will stares out into the sky, squinting against spring. He feels light. He adjusts the collar of the baby's clothes absent-mindedly, and can't bother to scold himself for doing it again.

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The morning's peace of course turns into mid-afternoon panic, because that's probably a more common setting in the working simulation of Will's life where he watches things happen like it's coming from a theatre screen and he just has to sit tight through it. The shiny silver Aston-Martin rolling down the gravel drive feels like something he should be lobbing grenades at and telling the dogs to secure the perimeter against. He's also beginning to think everyone but him has invested their retirement into luxury vehicles, and insists on parading them next to his often dirty and aging station wagon as some sort of callout. Between Margot, Hannibal, and whoever this person is, he's starting to develop theories.

Watching Byron Metcalfe step out of it is definitely not an improvement.

"I think they refer to this as *fraternizing*," yells Will from the porch, not willing to greet him directly just yet.

The attorney shakes his head with an unflappable Cheshire grin. "Not on that kind of business today, Mr. Graham. Your awkward walk through the cross-examination last week was enough for me to know what to do for *that* case."

Great, thinks Will. He really did cock up last Tuesday. He shakes it off, mouth twisting into a grimace.

Will invites him in, because that's what you do when you have visitors, even if you are anticipating them giving you a hard time, and that you probably shouldn't. Metcalfe, however, wields his black portfolio and a handful of unmarked manila folders with such force that Will is honestly curious what he wants bad enough to come all the way out to Wolf Trap.

He probably should put Anita on speakerphone to make sure he's not about to blow up his own testimony, or more hilariously have someone try to intimidate him *a la* Margot. (*Margot is paying for your attorney, so that's kind of a non-starter, isn't it?*) He kind of hopes Metcalfe tries - like Will hasn't already been dragged through multiple attempts by Kade Purnell, Frederick Chilton, Jack Crawford, and several other faceless morons in the past couple of years. Hannibal would have surely advised against it, but Hannibal is also a fan of random variables taken out of context, and maybe he dislikes his lawyer enough to try and replicate his results with sending Randall out to Will's house.

"I got your letter," says Metcalfe, rather abruptly. "It was passed to the appropriate people. Turns out we have some unexplored territory to cover."

The appropriate people.

That's an uncomfortable prospect. Will rolls a shoulder, and puts Beatrice on the bed to kick around unbound. Harley settles in next to her, looking suspiciously up at their guest. "The office paralegals and the U.S. Attorney, so you can make a stink about me trying to compromise your arguments?"

That would be the smart play if Metcalfe's a betting man. Metcalfe seems like he's smart. The alternative...well, Will never considered the alternative outside of imaginary rebuttals.

Metcalfe looks at him, scratching at the grey of his beard like this line of questioning irritates him, or that he's searching for something to say. Will files that away.

"No, I sent it to our mutual acquaintance, the defendant," Metcalfe replies with a roll of his own shoulder and a firm smile. "That's what you wanted, correct? '**Your call, bud**', I think was the exact phrasing."

Will feels the blood drain from his face. Oh god, not smart, *not smart.*

"I was kind of anticipating you would make the correct call," he says in a very small voice.

Metcalfe looks around at the house and largely ignores what Will is certain ought to be his heart rolling around somewhere on the wood floors, desperate to not be seen. A tell-tale heart he hadn't bothered to properly bury. The man's assessment of the space is not unlike Margot's, but more that of a surveyor, taking inventory.

He brushes something invisible from his waist - maybe dog hair. "As far as I'm concerned, I did. I've been Lecter's attorney for longer than he's been a practicing psychiatrist. He would have found it very vexing to find out I withheld something that belonged to him," and he licks his teeth to this. "I'm not in the business of displeasing clients, especially ones with a fondness for people beyond the scope of standard social norms and more in the territory of wine accompaniments. I'm acting under the assumption that you followed a similar policy."

"I try not to indulge Hannibal on principle."

(*You indulge him all the time. You just have to agonize about it for a while beforehand.*)

He receives a laugh in response. "Wouldn't be in the kind of pickle you are with the case if you actually didn't, right? But you definitely did this time, and damn did you ever," Metcalfe needles. "And now here we are."

"So here we are," Will echoes. "Do we play telephone now and see how the message distorts? Are you here to say that he laughed? That he opened his greeting card like any other note from an aunt that doesn't miss any holiday and told you to thank me for it? That I should open an Audubon guide instead of bothering him in his cell block on biology outside his expertise?"

Another laugh in reply, with what looks to be a indulgent look. God, Hannibal *would* pick the most casually arrogant attorney on the East Coast. "No, Graham, I can tell you quite confidently that he didn't laugh, though I could have done without the five minutes of abject silence with no indication of when it would end. He's unnerving when he gets all still like that, as I'm sure you well know."

Will shrugs. "Predators have forward facing eyes to better see prey. You should remind him to blink in court," he huffs under his breath, but his face feels hot. He hates being embarrassed. He hates it when people can see he's embarrassed. "So he didn't laugh, he just thought it wasn't worth remark."

“Oh, there were remarks alright, but not the ones I expected. Here,” says Metcalfe, handing over a letter, something blue on legal paper. “You should read this. Thoroughly.”

Will takes it - it’s all digital, addressed from Metcalfe’s firm. There’s a tug somewhere in Will’s chest that he recognizes as disappointment, but what did he expect? A handwritten note in return with...a request to clarify? A profusion of excitement, with requests for pictures? He didn’t really have expectations when he sent it, but of course Will Graham gets a formal notice from attorneys, because that’s the sensible thing he should have expected, not some kind of Hallmark bonding moment brought on by a greeting card from Wal-Mart.

When he actually bothers to read it when the sting in his face recedes, a totally different emotion bubbles forward - it’s definitely anxiety, riding in like the fifth unspoken horseman of the Apocalypse, and it can’t believe Will ever forgot about it.

***Date:*** *April 5th, 20XX*

***From The Offices of Metcalfe & Associates, Attorneys at Law***

*1000 Lancaster St.*

*Baltimore, MD 21231*

***Phone:*** *410-677-1XXX*

***Facsimile:*** *410-677-2XXX*

***Email:*** ***metcalfeb@metcalfelegal.com***

***To:***

*William Sawyer Graham, mother of Beatrice Graham*

*4 Difficult Run Rd.*

*Wolf Trap, VA 22181*

*Mr. Graham,*

*It has been requested that your daughter, Beatrice Graham, be named as the sole trustee and beneficiary of two inter vivos trusts that our firm has assisted in managing for the past several years, and added as a beneficiary on a third. This includes a number of properties, bonds, investment accounts, and access to existing checking and savings accounts that will be retitled on your daughter's behalf.*

*To establish her as a trustee with full undisputed inheritance rights, we ask that you consent as your daughter's legal guardian to a basic paternity test. This will be completed discreetly, and will not require revisions to your existing guardianship documents when completed. The trustor doesn't wish to cause you or your daughter undue hardship, but is a legal requirement for some of the associated estate, and a safeguard for the rest.*

*By consenting, it will be unnecessary to establish paternity through a traditional legal channel at a later date. Due to impending civil litigation, we highly advise taking this route.*

*Please contact our offices at your soonest convenience - we are on a very tight schedule.*

*Best Regards,*

***Byron Metcalfe** , Esq. Principal Partner, Criminal and Personal Law*

***Jurgen Schreiber** , Managing Partner, Estate Law*

(*Mother? Again? WHY.*)

"What... what am I supposed to do with this?" he asks.

"Consent," says Metcalfe, like it's as natural as breathing. "Unless you really want to go to court more than once in the next couple of months. I don't manage this part of the business

personally - that honor goes to the co-signed here, and he is *very* invested in making sure this particular cookie stays in his cookie jar."

"Isn't it kind of redundant to do another paternity test?" Will asks, trying to make sense of things, and to reassert some of his apparently missing masculinity. It was one thing when the birds and the county clerks were insistent on this - he has zero expectation of accuracy from either. It's a totally different kettle of fish to have actual acquaintances alluding to it now, much less known professionals who really ought to be able to spot his substantial stubble after a week of not shaving. Not to mention it's a spectacularly bad idea.

Metcalfe adjusts his sleeves. "Did you miss where it takes two to make a baby, Mr. Graham?"

Unreal.

Will brings both hands to his head to pull at his hair until his eyes cross from the strain. "Is no one ever going to acknowledge that I am biologically incapable of producing offspring as a mother? Are you all in on this stork thing, or am I just in time for my next existential unraveling?"

"I felt the same when my son was born," says Metcalfe, nodding, appearing vaguely mystified. That fucking look again. "I bought a boat and got divorced."

Will snorts.

(*Arguably, you did the same right before having children.*)

"We remarried right after," adds Metcalfe, like that helps.

(*Strangely, it does when it shouldn't.*)

The paper sits in his hands, still very blue and ominous, the same way the first time he sees the birth certificate. It's so carefully worded to avoid any mention of Hannibal that it's borderline obscene, but really, isn't it better that way? It's asking for a lot. It's offering a lot. He's not sure he wants to know how much of either exactly.

None of this computes. "So I sent a borderline blank message and he...is gifting my child his entire estate?"

Metcalfe nods. "Yeah, I thought it was certifiably nuts too. The only thing he asked after he stopped being a statue was what her name was. I'm glad I asked the girls at the deposition last week, because as soon as I said it, he smiled, like he expected it. Didn't want to talk about the trial, didn't really want to talk about the deposition. You'd think I had personally brought him a cigar and glass of celebratory champagne instead of reading materials for his defense."

"He's just...accepting this is a thing?"

Metcalfe laughs a bit, setting his yellow envelopes down on the counter without permission, but so confident that Will almost wants to congratulate him for the audacity of it. "Daddy Warbucks wants to give Annie the mansion before the civil lawsuits move forward after the federal and state cases," he says. "You should let him. All the details," he adds, "are here."

Will picks Beatrice up again, agitated, and a little insecure about toting her around like unwieldy luggage. He dreads when she can figure out to roll herself over. "So what, it's some kind of shelter for his money?"

Metcalfe scratches at his beard again, smoothing the grain of it downward. "It removes his rights to reclaim it in the incredibly unlikely event that he ever gets out of prison. It's written to be a pretty thorough divestment. If that's his kid," he says with a pointing finger, "then she has a valid claim to it before the punitive damages hit. Hell, even if she isn't, half of it could still transfer over before the courts can even ask for access to the summaries."

He fishes around in his suit pocket, and out comes a cell phone, a simple black one, inexpensive and utilitarian. Metcalfe waves it back and forth between his pinched fingers, before setting it on top of the envelopes.

“For situations like this, I prefer to use the office travel phones,” he explains, hands returning to the pockets of his jacket. “It doesn’t text, but it’ll keep your personal phone off the record for any...entanglements with our other professional interactions at the moment. At least until you decide what you want to do. Think about it, seriously, and call me or Jurgen, anytime.”

When the attorney moves to leave, Will follows him out the door, shell-shocked. “Why would you help him with this? Why would you even want to? Or me, for that matter. He eats people, and I am a poster child for suspicious figures these days.”

“Money, Mr. Graham. Managing the estate is a way better income producer for my firm, even if the trial will get me lots of attention in the future. I do a lot of distasteful things for money.”

“I guess everyone has their price,” Will mutters.

“To the tune of one percent of the accounts annual value, which is more than it sounds like.” Metcalfe says with a laugh, and pulls his car keys out to leave. “One more thing, Graham,” he throws out behind him.

Will gives him his best unimpressed look.

Metcalfe waves from behind his car door. “The phone won’t ring very often, but it will ring if it’s important. Try to keep the sound on, regardless of nap time.”

Yeah, fuck that, thinks Will as the car drives off. Fuck all of this. Fuck Hannibal, fuck divesting assets and naming beneficiaries, and fuck trying to make sense of any of this. The new parent Will Graham knows nap times are sacred and silent. The new parent Will Graham avoids obvious snares. The new parent Will Graham wouldn’t know what to do with a hedge fund stock portfolio or real estate asset management if it bit him directly in the ass.

(*Somewhere beyond the rejection - relief. Someone else to share the madness with. Someone else that’s acknowledged the bird might be onto something, that Will doesn’t have to explain*

*in the same surreal tone over and over again. Of course it's Hannibal - who else would ever be insane enough to see the same design?*)

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Not having a TV for the evening news has never been much of an issue for Will. He's rarely been required to sit in one place long enough for it to matter, and besides, he hates the poor articulation of nuanced things from big haired ladies and shiny toothed men. Sometimes, he misses the white noise of it, the sensation of sitting with his dad in the living room with his legs up on the thrifted couch table and listening to the warble of people through the speakers in the background. The 7 pm broadcast, same time every day, just in time for Beau to get off of work and Will to be done with homework.

With Beatrice, he wishes there was some kind of locus for their attention. She's good company the way the dogs are good company, and he knows she'll be even better the more her vision improves and her range of motion increases, but he often finds himself looking for entertainment that keeps him from living in his head or down the neck of a bottle.

He's tried reading *The Sound and the Fury* out loud to her, but the concept of fallen aristocrats sinking into depravity and obscurity just made him depressed.

(*The manila envelopes that Byron Metcalfe leaves behind, filled with accounts of Beatrice's new potential fortune for his review just drive this home today - you'd throw them away, but you're throwing something of Beatrice's away before she's had an opportunity to form a mind, less so an opinion, and that tastes sour. You try to ignore them and their glaring yellowness. It's not for you.*)

He's tried reading the scant few baby books he has, but they have about two paragraphs of content, so he can make a full run through all of them in about ten minutes, if he really drags it out. He'd try making a proper dinner, but something about him doing it in lieu of who usually would be doing it leaves him adrift and staring at boxes of easy rice and beans.

(*You chew a granola bar gratefully - grateful for every cheap chocolate chip and over milled oat in it. You don't have to bear consideration of being a voluntary sous chef to a person who will no doubt be a legendary chef, for reasons other than his creative preparation, and that's kind of a shame. So for now, granola bars are fine.*)

When the cell phone that Metcalfe leaves with the golden yellow envelopes rings in the quiet of the house, lit up by its screen and the evening sunlight coming through the front windows, it's a relief, even as it's an annoyance. Entertainment, even if it's the aggravating financial kind. Something that is *not* staring into the void while the baby makes an honest effort to chew off a button at the cuff of his shirt. He doesn't know the phone number calling, or hell, even the phone number for the cell phone he has, but really, how many people could know it? Will just grabs it off the counter with his happy-as-of-now baby and sits back down, putting it to his ear, sporting for an argument.

"Hello?"

There's a click - an automated message starting. Well thank goodness he forgot to put it on silent for *this*, he thinks nastily.

"Hello," it says, a bland electronic woman's voice. Seems Will won't be having an argument after all.

It continues:

"You are about to receive a call from *Hannibal Lecter* , an inmate housed at the Chesapeake Detention Facility. Before accepting this collect telephone call, please be advised that accepting a collect call will cost you more than it would if you prepaid for this collect call. Collect calls are charged at $0.65 cents for up to a 20 minute call; and prepaid collect calls are charged at $0.59 cents for up to a 20 minute call. If you still want to accept this collect call, please touch *45. To prevent future calls from this facility touch *75."

Alright, maybe he will.

There's an agonizing three seconds where Will doesn't know what to do - he just stares blankly at the keypad of the phone, as stupid and empty as any other person when Will says something strange these days. It's a comfort to still be able to feel shock like this, even if he feels gutted by it. It must be a mistake.

(*He must want to talk to Metcalfe. He must have something useful to do with his one phone call for the week. He must want to follow up on something important, and logical, and productive, and not on your capricious desire that constantly wavers between wanting to set the two of you on fire so that you don't have to be honest with him, and wanting to just sit in each other's warmth, aflame but unburned.*)

Around the smell of formula and the tickle of the tiny nymph of a daughter at his hip, Will's heart gives a tug against his better judgment. Mistakes are good things these days.

(*A thought, sliding into place. He wants to talk to you, and doesn't have a safer way to do it than this, because writing doesn't fulfill what he wants to say*.)

Will dials *45 to accept, and pretends his tongue isn't stuck to the back of his throat.

"This call is subject to monitoring and recording."

And it clicks.

There's a long static silence. Will swallows around his discomfort, unsure what he should say. Monitored and recorded, he repeats to himself, and feels the pressure to not fuck this up. Hell, what if it's a joke? It wouldn't be the first fucked-up thing someone's tried to pull on him in recent recall.

There's a sigh on the other end, something slow through the nose.

And that's Hannibal.

"Please don't feel obligated to say anything at this time," comes the smooth familiar voice from the receiver, studiously proper. "I simply wished to ensure that you had been contacted with the appropriate documents."

Will feels his throat click dryly when he brings his tongue to his teeth. In the nook of his arm, Beatrice warbles and blinks into the redness of sunset. There's motes of dust suspended in them - he knows she can't, but hopes anyway that she sees them. His own eyes drift with them, uncommonly wet.

He has to say something. There will be a weird gap in the recording. There will be something to investigate, to turn over in the warden's office like gold. Will resents being responsible for that, even as he's unexpectedly full of want. "Yeah," he says, a little lamely around his choked voice. "Yeah, I did."

"And will you allow it?" comes the reply, still steady.

(*You're a good actor when you need to be, but he's still the best you know.*)

"I don't know, but I guess that's everything in summary for the last couple weeks...Are you ever going to explain the bird thing to me?" Will asks, half expecting the usual mystification. He's burdened with it, the only sane man in the room when that's so far from being the truth any other time.

Hannibal drops the pretense, if only for a moment.

"Oh my dear," comes the tender reply, something honest and molten. Will feels the quiet of snow and rustling journal pages, and the tear of fabric in his hands. *My dear, my dear, my dear*. "I would explain anything you asked of me, no matter how absurd it feels right now. But," and to this he sounds authentically sad, though maybe that's just the scratch of bad reception, "tonight I'm afraid it's all business."

Will reluctantly laughs. "God forbid we become friendly."

A little smiling huff. Will can picture it, the tight twist of narrow lips, the crescent of Hannibal's eyes, looking more like a marble statue than a man. It's good to still be able to picture it, a glacial lake with the cloven depths of a valley for a face.

“Just keep it professional,” says Hannibal with an amused hum. “Until next time.”

And the line goes quiet, clicking to its end. Will is informed of the charges for the call that he’s incurred, and when he can expect it on the phone bill. Will doesn’t really pay it much attention, wishing he had been able to record the call himself.

# why the conventional pregnancy wisdom is wrong

There are many spires on the roof of the Lecter Castle. They reach upwards out of the trees of Aukštaitija with a casual arrogance that most grand human structures have, and this is exactly why at least one such spire must be properly humbled, or so Hannibal's father says. Hannibal's father knows and says a lot of things, in many more languages than anyone else he knows, so Hannibal is confident in the way that most children are that he is probably correct.

This humbling is how in the spring of the year Hannibal turns five, a pair of storks begins nesting on the top of the northwest one, blocking the chimney that services some of the guest quarters, and starting a chain of events that Hannibal will later understand to be a severely long-winded and oblique path to his impending fatherhood.

It's not what he envisioned, but he supposes that's half the fun.

The nest building doesn't *quite* happen overnight - the family listens to the clacking of the storks' beaks from under the eaves of the stone walls that face the little wilderness that divides the property from the neighboring lakes, the great swooping of their wings as they go back and forth, back and forth, looking for the most perfect pieces of dried reeds, sticks, and underbrush that suits their fancy. They are diligent, if a little befuddled in the craft of their first home on the roofline - it is thought they must be first-time parents. However by the end of April, a very tidy nest ensures that anyone on the northwest side of the house will be cold if the fire is needed for a chilly spring night. The storks dance for each other in the evening, delighted with their new home.

Hannibal's father and the light staff that they can afford to employ during the week are all very charmed by their new residents, and declare it to surely be good luck. It's an old estate, but there have been no storks on the property in Hannibal's lifetime, so this is seen as fortuitous. Besides, how many chilly guests do they really have that should take precedence over such a blessed sign? Why, the neighbors down the lane have waited for a pair to build a nest on their wagon wheel for *three years* now with no luck, so they must be properly grateful for their feathered tenants.

Hannibal's mother, already by nature unaccustomed to the cold, wet climate of Lithuania and more inclined to summer in Italy with her family, immediately suggests that one of the few groundskeepers that still come by during the week should knock it down before they've laid their eggs. A practical woman at heart, she thinks it's a waste to close off an entire portion of the house for their uninvited renters, and it would be cruel to do it when they've already bedded down with their babes. Storks, she observes, are really quite common throughout Europe.

As a person not born in Lithuania, she does not quite understand the vehement resistance that this suggestion receives from Hannibal's father and everyone else that she encounters. Hannibal doesn't quite understand it either, but Hannibal doesn't think many people understand *him*, so this feels right.

(*Everyone around you is so confident in its presence that you become concerned you've missed something important, as though you and your mother are too different from the rest of the household to know. "Oh, you Italians," he hears at the dinner table when Simonetta complains for better wine, or softer breads instead of the dark rye he likes to soak in broth. Oh, you Italians and your southern blood, you repeat in thought, sitting close to your mother*.)

So the nest stays.

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On a summer evening while Hannibal's father taps away at a carton of cigarettes, the white and blue letters of *Belomorkanal* looking strange in the half light of the sunset in the courtyard, Hannibal finally submits himself to asking why the nest is allowed to stay. Hannibal doesn't care for the smell of the cigarettes and generally avoids his father when he's got them out, but everyone smokes in this time, and he learns to suffer through it until modes of thought change over the years. The question about the nest is pressing on him to the point of frustration, and so the cigarettes must be suffered.

Hannibal is shy of his father, or perhaps wary - Hannibal the Elder is an angular, serious-faced man that Hannibal the Younger assumes he will grow to also look like. He teaches English, German, and Lithuanian with the kind of sweeping insistence that Hannibal has learned is common in adults that think they are in charge. He is very much of the "children are to be seen, not heard" variety when outside of his lessons. He is a harsh critic, and a

sharp-dresser, though not so exotic as his mother who takes her imported creature comforts that she can in ill-gotten gifts that pass through the mail and avoid speculation of the Communist government and hides them in a carved chest near to the kitchen. None think to look for evidence of her excesses there, buried under linen towels and impractically deep besides.

His father hates the chest almost as much as the things in it - something he often catches a foot on, and swears loudly at.

“Frippery,” his father calls it. “Unnecessary.”

(*You admire it - both the frippery, the chest, and his sharp mode of dress. If you could just grow to be both so fierce and bright, a leopard in your spots, your stillness would benefit you instead of make others suspicious. It would give you places to hide.*)

When Hannibal approaches his namesake, feeling very solemn and serious about his question, he is rewarded with a smile, something usually hard-won.

“A home with a stork nest is a home in harmony,” says his father, flicking ash from his cigarette over the viburnum bush near to the retaining wall. Hannibal knocks the white spots off the green leaves with small hands to set it to rights, watching the ash scatter. “Our country is blessed as we are fortunate to play host to many storks. If we treat them well, perhaps they will gift us with a brother or sister for you,” he adds with a wink. “Wouldn’t that be something?”

“How would they do that?” asks Hannibal, nose scrunched.

“Well the stork brings babies, of course!” his father says with a laugh. “And good crops too - the farmers are quite keen to keep their nests, and we should be too. Hard enough to eat well in these times without a stork’s ire.”

Hannibal, who has recently seen the neighboring property’s chestnut mare foal out in the field and thought it was both fascinating and disgusting, is certain this doesn’t sound right.

Hannibal the Elder is amused at his skepticism, smiling wide around his bristled face and smelling of tobacco, and tells him to “ask anybody,” like it’s the best joke he’s ever told.

Living in the countryside makes this a very troubling task. Hannibal tries to verify with the cook the next morning, the only adult other than his mother that he is comfortable with, who just smiles and tells him that’s just so. He is given four small perch fish from the traps down by the lake, and told to find his father again. Carrying his fish, he also finds Simonetta shuffling through her chest with both arms, who at the sight of him is too distraught at him bare-handling the fish to answer other than irritably. “Of course," she sighs from the throat, "don’t get too curious about babies,” desperately trying to wipe his hands clean. She reaches a hand into the chest and eventually settles for sacrificing a handkerchief for him to carry his fish in, and sends him along to his father.

His father takes him to the side of the house with the nest - in the daytime, both storks take turns sitting on their bed of sticks and hunting for food, their feathers disturbing the air like clockwork going from the spire to the lake to the spire again. When one of them seems to spot them on the ground, it turns its great head to watch, and glides down into a closer branch of an old oak tree.

“Toss it a fish,” he is told in the same tone he is told to recite conjugate verbs, and words that describe times of day. “We want to be welcoming housekeepers, yes?”

Hannibal obliges in his usual mechanical way, though his eyes widen when the stork not only catches the fish, but gulps it down with little effort. An opportunistic predator with pretty white plumage, watching with intent as Hannibal unfolds his mother’s handkerchief for the other three fish within. One, two, three fish down the hatch, the serpentine neck of the bird still looking down for more. Hannibal is a little embarrassed when he runs out of offerings, the bird ruffling its feathers to head back up to its little tower and clack beaks with its mate.

His father claps him on the shoulder, a big hand that’s a little too rough but that Hannibal appreciates is trying to show something like affection, the same way he clasps shoulders with his brother, Uncle Robertus who lives in Paris. Hannibal wonders which of the two was brought by the stork last, and if they could describe how it was done.

“Now we see if they thank us,” his father explains, “with a child for your mama, or a good year for our house. Wish hard for it, and let’s hope they listen.”

Unaccustomed to the idea of other children or siblings, Hannibal nods, and privately dreads the results. He's been so far content to be an only child, and the other kids in town are so *loud*. But Hannibal, more like his mother in tastes, visibly like his father in looks, and *very different* in the way he thinks, is a curious boy, and babies are unexplored territory.

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Hannibal goes day to day and very dutifully to feed the storks. While he is not sold on the idea of a sibling, he is sold on the idea of his potential sibling being terrible if he doesn't dedicate himself to making the storks happy. They are guests. That is why his mother worries about when they are playing host to guests from the city, or the government, or the rare bit of family that comes from Paris and Milan, helping prepare zakuski spreads for the Party Officials that she and father don't care for, or cold cuts for the neighbors which they do.

Always considering preference, Simonetta is. Everyone must be accounted for and contingencies made.

(*You will inherit this, her marked observance of preference. It's good for manipulation. It's good for being a pleasing host. Both are valid reasons and both are learned, for all that the majority of your nature is native born.*)

By his third week of offering the perch from the lake traps, he has a sort of kinship with the storks, or as close to kinship as one gets while throwing rejected small fish at birds and expecting high-quality siblings as his due. He comes every day after lessons, and they anticipate him by sitting in the high branches of a large elderflower bush that is beginning to fruit. They are quite rude with him, but patient with each other, and never leave before receiving four fish each, taking turns in returning to their nest where downy little chicks sometimes can be seen from the edge of their nest.

He asks them to make his sister pretty, or his brother smart, or at least not too loud. Hannibal might be fine with anything as long as it doesn't look like the stork's actual children. The chicks are very ugly in their grey and black feathers, their beaks not yet turned red. However, the round symmetry of the nest that they rest in is pleasing, capping off the chimney, looking more like the head of a tall daisy than a home for the fuzzy bodies of the stork fledglings.

On the sparse trips between Utena and Vilnius that he is allowed to attend, he watches other homes in the green of the pastoral fields and woods, and finds that there are other stork nests there too. That makes more sense - there's a lot of children, ergo there must be a lot of storks to bring them.

After five weeks of watching the storks feed their young, he starts to hope that this is all for something, and his little prayers over bites of fish are heard by the birds, and that his parents will have a baby if only to prove it. Storks, not being the type to make much noise, entirely mute save for their clacking beaks, swishing wings, and nimble heads, don't really do anything to assure him. Their silent communications are between each other, secret, theirs to keep.

They look like they're fencing instead of greeting each other - faces like swords in hand with a thrust and parry. Ungentle with each other but dedicatedly in love in the perfect symmetry of their dance if the family is to be believed, heads thrown back.

(*You feel the wild ecstasy of that symmetry decades later, eyes brightly taking in the gallery lights on the tempera of Primavera, taking in the dark softness of Will's gaze to you when you turn to match it. In hindsight, it is a shame that you did not look at it more with the lens of the very fine boned wings of the storks splayed behind them with the same reverence of your praying skeleton in the floor of the duomo, their unfailing and faithful danse macabre.*)

When their fledglings are ready to fly in the late summer, they leave for the south. St. Bartholomew's Day, he is told, is when they often depart. Hannibal stomps around the courtyard and house for days, bitterly disappointed in the way that children often are (*even ones like you*), and adults too when disappointment becomes a grief. (*Also like you.*)

"Not to worry, *tesoro*," says Simonetta, petting at the fine blonde hairs of his scalp, her fingers scratching at the skin beneath. It comforts him even as he wants to rip his hair out, overstimulated and resentful of being treated like a baby himself. "We can't just go about having babies every year, local custom or not."

From the couch nearby, his father snorts, and Simonetta rolls her eyes.

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On March 25th, Gandrinės, the Stork Day rolls into their home with Hannibal feeling a bit sorry for himself but smarter now at six years old. Five year old Hannibal reluctantly accepted wanting a sibling. Now at six years old he's very happy to be an only child, and the birds will have to find their own dinner this year because he has too much to do after language lessons with his father. Arithmetic and penmanship are for gentleman, which he aspires to be.

Nonetheless, his parents make him go through the whole song and dance of the festivities, which includes a number of candies for Hannibal (*received positively*), hanging dyed eggs from the trees in the courtyard (*received negatively - you do not want to be picked up to do this, and are moody about it*), and a nice bonfire on the front drive with the neighbors and their children. This is all well and good, one of the most normal experiences he can recall before things take a troubling turn for the Lecter family fortunes, until his parents pull him aside to say that they need to tell him one more thing before the passing of the holiday.

"All your hard work has paid off," says Simonetta, her hair wrapped in a beautiful white lace cloth for Mass, beautiful white teeth smiling like she's said something particularly witty. His father mutters something with a grumbling laugh that he's fairly sure *he* did the hard work, but Hannibal doesn't hear it all, or really understand.

"The stork left us a present," she says with her toothy smile, "and you're going to be a big brother."

Hannibal is mystified by this clear up to the autumn, staring in suspicion at the stork nest on the northwest spire with extreme prejudice. On one hand, he's been told that the stork has left the baby inside his mother to finish growing, and that's what happens with mothers when mothers are ready to help them. On the other hand, it feels a little unfair that a wish from last year is so grossly delayed, but Hannibal is six, and doesn't quite understand storks yet, or women for that matter, so he supposes he'll have to wait to get the full story when he's older. All the adults love telling him that it's a secret between the storks and the parents, and that it doesn't do any good prying into it.

There seems to be *a lot* of things that he's not supposed to understand until he's older.

He continues to ask the cook for fish when the birds return, on the off-chance that there's any opportunity for them to change their mind about what they've designed for his family. When Mischa is born in the late warmth of an October day, that fear falls away.

She's a pretty baby, good tempered, and generally not inclined to fuss. Fair haired like him. Doesn't spit up a lot, which is good because Hannibal hates the smell of it as he learns over the first couple of months. Everything he's fervently wished for, thrown into the air with the little lake perch to be caught by the red beaks of the storks. His parents let him hold her, and there's nothing in his short life so far that he has loved like that, and he is grateful. Hannibal, quiet, strange, temperamental Hannibal, feels the first strong emotion that will shape who and what he values.

(*You might have asked them not to bring you Mischa if you knew what was coming next for the spires of Lecter Castle. Return to sender, handle with care - receiver not at this address.*)

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Six year old Hannibal was quite content to try to be a good brother the way he is not always a good son. He's still strange and quiet, but his attention is centered on his human sister fledgling that follows him as a duckling follows a mallard.

Twelve year old Hannibal is a different person living in an alien life by comparison. Twelve year old Hannibal is ill-content with everything and mute, forgetting about six year old Hannibal, leaving him behind somewhere on the train between Vilnius and his arrival in Paris along with the house and the orphanage and everything else that has made him the quietest he's ever been. The nests on the rooftops and wagon wheels of his homeland disappear as he seeks shelter in the western and south parts of Europe, looking like empty baskets now, or perhaps graves.

Good riddance, he thinks, watching them pass.

(*Maybe you were always irrevocably called by your Sforza blood to be somewhere else, but maybe being a Sforza is just a more beautiful fantasy than being a Lecter. All their bloodshed is generations away, made clean by history, where the Lecters are still newly red and wounded. You'll fix that - bloodshed is welcome in this Sforza mouth in the modern era as much as the medieval, as long as it's your hand shedding it.*)

Hannibal in his mid-20s is wiser and talkative, healed by knowledge and time and his own designs upon his fellow man. He is uncommonly smart even amongst people twice his age. Smart, unchallenged animals are destructive. Hannibal thinks killing people who wrong him is a sufficient challenge to ease the boredom (*pain-loneliness-apathy*) of growing older with no one to be accountable to. There are few who think they have that influence, but truly, they don't.

When he returns to Lecter Castle for the first time in more than a decade, he has some mischief in mind - he catches a man that helps cover up the butchering of his sister to the Soviet officials, and has a mind to butcher him as well, but Chiyoh, an ersatz cousin through his Aunt Murasaki...ah, Chiyoh is not so keen on his idea of a good time, barely more than a girl herself, and despite promises of helping him finish his quest with the idealism of a person's first act against injustice, finds this hard to follow through on. Hannibal doesn't argue with her.

Instead, he gives her a choice. Guard the man, or kill him. Let her sit and watch the wine cellar like Hannibal fruitlessly watched the northwest spire for all he cares. If her dread of being a vigilant deathwatch is less than her dread of enacting death on someone, then she's welcome to the house and whatever else she finds in it.

(*A perpetrator of a crime against you is left to her with the castle, but not one of* ***the*** *perpetrators. She doesn't know, and you don't think you'll share that, a fitting punishment for trying to subvert you. It's funny to think Chiyoh thought you'd put at risk your vengeance for Mischa for her young weak heart. She'll get older like you - she'll understand then.)*

When the matter is settled, Chiyoh trying to make some sense of her new home and duties, Hannibal has a moment where he's not sure what's keeping him there. Chiyoh certainly has no use for him, still angry and confused at her new charge, and he doesn't intend to return to the castle ever again if he can help it. Hannibal would prefer no more material to ignite his grief when already the underbrush is burnt out and clean. He is completing his surgical training. He is moving to America. He is casting off the face of Hannibal Lecter, tragic political orphan, and putting on the face of Hannibal Lecter, doctor and socialite. Hannibal is as free of his perfect gift of a sister as he wills himself to be.

But...it's the last time Hannibal will be here. So he walks the halls one last time. He looks into what was his bedroom, now more decay than decor. He looks into Mischa's room across the hall, and has to mind to not take things with him. The front hall is a charnel house. The

basement is a prison. The kitchen is a tomb. The chest in the hallway sealed tight and dusty and refuses to be pried open.

It verifies all that he feels is correct, and it is self-preservation to leave this salted earth behind.

Not everything is sepulchral and unchanged though. The northwest spire next to the little wilderness that leads to the lake still has a nest on it, blackened from someone using the fireplaces below, but rebuilt again since. The pair of storks doesn't seem to confer as much harmony as was implied by his father, but he smiles at the idea of them returning and finding they have the entire house to themselves, crowding all the spires and chimneys with an illustrious family tree of their own. They are more constant than people. Their persistence fills their little hollow bones. That's somehow reassuring, that they take things back in increments if they can just outlast the present circumstances.

(*Lessons for yourself.*)

Because terrible years make for terrible memories, Hannibal's meticulousness in routines is transferred into becoming a skilled organizer out of necessity. The assault on his home, the murder of his parents, the gristle of tendons and connective tissue in watery broth that he realizes too late is his sister in the icy cold of the house when hunger hurts him... all those don't have space to be visited in his mind anymore. With that, he also shuffles all thoughts of his parents, and storks, and late night bonfires on holidays into tidy boxes that can be put on empty shelves in empty rooms in his head, lock the doors behind him and forget the key.

He keeps the shape of the nest somewhere he can find it, because Hannibal loves a well-made thing, even if it's vacant of meaning with the memory behind it safely shelved. It's something to admire, the way he can admire his father's sharp suits, and his mother's wild fabrics - beautiful when divorced from context.

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Will Graham is an awkward surprise for a settled man in his mid 40s with zero interest in changing his lifestyle.

(*Or children, but more on that soon.*)

Settled is the phrase that Hannibal uses as it suits him - he is academically and medically skilled, comfortably wealthy, and has an assortment of hobbies that keep him content in the absence of those missing people he's never replaced to be accountable to. He's certain that most if not all live-in partners would take some offense to him using the hall bathroom on occasion to homebrew beer, and that he doesn't want to be spoken to for the first 10 seconds of eating a meal. He's not to be interrupted during harpsichord time. He's not going to clear space in the closet for someone. He's never shared an honest, internal thought.

The murdering and desecration is also kind of a big investment of funds and time that could be a strain on any relationship.

This twitchy, willowy man that the FBI sits in front of him is in most ways someone Hannibal would not be partial to. He is unkempt, snapping in his responses, and dismissive of Hannibal by merit of his vocation instead of something more worthwhile, like taste in music, or how they differ in ways to spend a Saturday night. (*Admittedly you use your vocation very liberally to alter his life in the coming months, so perhaps there's something to that. To further that more, your idea of a good Saturday night is using your vocation to induce seizures and encourage some good old-fashioned Abel and Cain justice. So.*) He has too many dogs, which indicates poor coping mechanisms, or compulsive behavior. He is afraid to be himself, which suggests later opposition to Hannibal's most cherished pastimes.

Yet.

He is beautifully spoken, more akin to an orator than the expected anti-social high-functioning neuroatypical that Will Graham professes to be, a judgmental observation of himself. There's poetry in the way he hears death in the yellow tape and viscera of a crime scene, and Hannibal matches it in a silent meeting of minds. He is principled despite his proclivity towards external change from others seeping into him. His identity is fluid, but with self-determined mass. His eyes are greener when he's tired. He cuts his portions of meat in symmetrical bites. He laughs at Hannibal's jokes. He listens and appreciates Hannibal's experience and knowledge, even as he hates to admit it, even when he learns of the hobbies, and the inside jokes that were shared but not spoken of. He is strikingly handsome. He is striking with blood strewn across him.

He is something Hannibal dearly wants, and because there is no medicine that can cure stupidity, Hannibal upends his orderly lifestyle out of fear that this person will disappear before he can make up his mind what to do about that.

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The plan is to give Will whatever he needs. It stands to reason that this is how Hannibal will get exactly what he wants - symbiosis typically makes the strongest partnerships in nature. Whether or not Will agrees with what Hannibal assesses as a need, well...that's inconsequential. Predictably, as someone with a constantly changing plan and emotions on how he feels about the efficacy of said plan after years of not evaluating feelings by merit of them often being useless or painful, things go badly. Comically badly in hindsight.

As the gardeners at the old house used to say, and to Hannibal's confusion until many years later, Will finds most of it *malonus kaip mergai busilas* - as agreeable as a stork to a maiden.

He tries to start out strong:

He offers a daughter, and this becomes a lynchpin that is sitting loose in its wheel - Will is living in someone else's obsession, but Hannibal's not one to knock something before he tries it, as the saying goes. Hannibal, to his own admission, has never wanted children. He had one once through the efforts of his parents, and it is still the most unspeakable memory that he must keep locked inside. Abigail, almost an adult herself, has the kind of qualities that he appreciates in a pupil, and her darkness aligns with the kind he wants for Will. (*"I'd like to adopt a grown man with his own apartment and a steady job," says a patient with a difficult daughter of her own - you see how that definitely sounds like less trouble.*) That Abigail is willing to *resentfully* play along is enough for him, up until it isn't. She's never really *Hannibal's* daughter, even if he sells it that way to keep Will in close confidence, and it's something that Will obviously desires to have.

He offers his friendship - Will is lonely too, and surely he has use for another person who thinks like him. Will accepts aspects of this, and Hannibal decides that's enough aspects for him to work with for the moment, and digs into every facet he can embed himself into. Just like well-adjusted friends do. (*You might have had an uneven concept of friendship at the time. Your therapist tries to insist on this, but Bedelia is a spoil-sport, and you're having a great go at overcoming obstacles and rebuttals without her ruining this for you.*)

He offers a look behind the curtain - Will's the first to appreciate it for what it is, and all healthy relationships should be built on trust, so please forget about the months preceding that point, they are now working on the trust part of things. Please observe Hannibal is the Chesapeake Ripper, and how good he is at hiding that from everyone else. Look how clever he is, weaving webs, always so Will can come to be at his side. Even Will wouldn't know had Hannibal not left the occasional clue for him.

He offers love, or his approximation of what that is after years of not recognizing it beyond the peaceful memory of holding a baby sister for the first time - Will is still working on the trust part of things long after Hannibal has surmounted the hurdle, and seems to not be as invested in it as a loving companion should be. Hannibal is a romantic at heart, the way he reads of constancy in epics, and hopes that his constancy will be able to surmount this as he has surmounted everything else in his way.

He offers a knife, because Hannibal knows offering a knife typically only goes one way, and he's well acquainted with it, and if Will is going to continue to refuse his most precious of things to need in the form of love, well, Hannibal will make sure the refusal is noted with a blade - Will is an outpouring of trembling anger and tears, resistant to the last. (*You held him and wished to press your lips to his, even as the fluid of the abdominal cavity spills over your hand - that's the way Hannibal Lecter loves, right?*) Their adoptive daughter is a pale ruin. The house is a mess.

None of this is what he wanted at all. Hannibal doesn't fully understand how he has failed to send his prayers to the right ears, no matter his diligence in routine and persistence.

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For a long time after this, he offers nothing. He is at a loss of what to give and has no desire to do so, and instead delights himself in nights out in Paris, and dancing in Florence, and contemplating sins through the lens of Dante Aligheri. The punishments for them have changed with the years, even if the sins have not. Apparently his moping about doesn't go unnoticed. Bedelia tells him he's acting like it's his first break up after college, and while he definitely resembles that remark, he doesn't appreciate it.

“Do you often bite the hand that feeds you?” he asks one day, particularly nettled. The summer sun on the stones of the balcony feels good on his hands, and a glass of white wine is sweating to the side. Bedelia, mood as featureless and unreadable as a smooth cliffside, just gives a placid smile.

“You bite regardless of being fed or not - what am I here for if not to emulate that?” she presses, voice *sotto voce*. She looks very trim and elegant in her flowing palazzo pants and carefully spiralled curls, a good Mrs. Fell, but a terrible compassionate wife. She is not a Simonetta for Hannibal even in her practicality.

(*You have a lot of gaps in your emotional knowledge. You hired a therapist to work around them, not get called out regularly over glasses of exceedingly expensive wine that you’re financing, that she drinks like it’s a cheap beer nomihodai in Osaka.*)

Between displays of torture and the elaborate ways humanity learned to hurt each other physically, so too does Hannibal think of what lies beyond Hell’s Circles, and it’s rings, ditches, and rounds. When do you see the bottom, and pass through the gravity of reality - when does that begin? Has it all just been a descent from the dark entrance of youth to now as an adult in the Ninth Circle, where the whole lot are traitors, doomed to consumption by Lucifer? What does he still need to learn of sin and repentance to summit the mountain of Purgatory? When does his own fair lady lead him out into the stars and Paradise beyond?

(*Your fair lady is not the woman you fake matrimony with. You have no confusion about that. You are anxious to meet the real one someday, and live in the hope that she was not your sister, long gone and not even a part of your cells these days. You don't remember what she tasted like, despite your substantial talent for recollection. That's a sin in and of itself.*)

“With all your pursuit of Inferno and Virgil, you neglect Beatrice, a staple of our city,” says Sogliato idly in the halls of the museum one day. “Surround yourself with the ugliness of the dark ages and the suffering, and you miss heaven’s shining maiden.”

Hannibal decides he will certainly kill the other man, but concedes the point. A little academic discourse is healthy, when no one else really challenges him here.

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After several months, Hannibal offers something again, a little less ugly and pointed than the knife. He offers his heart, made from bits of a man that is meaningless save that he looked like Will, with low expectation of it meaning much without its intended audience - but Will does see it. He understands it, and rests in the shadow of his absence while Hannibal watches from behind a prayer screen, feeling both wrathful and cowardly for it. It takes a while for the two of them to come to a mutual understanding that does not require Will to return Hannibal's previous gift of the knife, but they do reach one.

It just takes them making at least one more pass at killing each other.

They hang upside down in the drive of the Verger Farm together, and sit next to each other in the dining hall smiling between Mason Verger's meaningless diatribe, and suffer separately from each other until convenience and guilt drive Margot and Alana to release him as one releases an unbroken horse to the fields until he can be caught again. They stumble into the dark of the snow, the heavy weight of Will in his arms, still half-numb and vulnerable. It hurts his back terribly to carry the other man like this. It would hurt him more to not do it while he is able.

(*You didn't particularly like carrying the slick scaly bodies of perch out to the side of the castle, but it was important that you do it to send the message that you want to who it mattered to. You understand the significance of that, even if your gift from the storks was spoiled.*)

"What do I have left to lose, Will?" says Hannibal in the darkness of the farmhouse. What can he offer that he hasn't? What's left of him that Will needs, and that he wants that can make this life different?

"I would give you anything," he professes, and is surprised to feel that's true.

"You have a habit of taking things back," Will replies, with the hesitation of one often burnt. Hannibal would know - he's often held Will's hand to a flame. "I want you to fix what you broke, and I don't think that's actually possible."

Will, usually the shy violet, if a very feisty one these days, does something quite unexpected - he offers Hannibal something instead. A fleeting something, with teeth, blood and spit, and a kind of agonizing earnestness that makes both their eyes hurt with something they don't want to shed. (*Whoever admits to it first loses - even now it's a competition.*) Hannibal, always very forward with touching Will in the past, is meek in the face of a biting kiss, just holding what he can reach, enjoying the softness of skin, the blunt nails in his hair.

(*"Not to worry, tesoro."*)

It's a shock to hold the crease of Will's hips for a better grip instead of the neutrality of measuring up muscle as a butcher does. It's an ecstasy he did not fancy he would ever experience to put his mouth and his tongue to the scar tissue of his gift of the knife, feeling the nervous twitch of the skin beneath, committed to the passion but afraid of recurring pain. Will is vicious and gentle in equal measure, taking to Hannibal prying him open with grasping fingers as thought it was inevitable, always wanting to find a better way inside him. Sex is sacred and profane, and Hannibal, never ashamed to eat anything, takes all that he can before the snow can stop, and the consequences of his lavish, unaccountable lifestyle at last come back to punish him.

The bed in the living room has always been strange, but it *has* always been there as certainly as his mother's chest in the kitchen hall. With Will's arms over his head, facing him from the blankets and sheets below, it feels sheltered and rounded, with them clicking teeth together in intervals when the intimacy of their eyes becomes too much.

Hannibal doesn't have better ideas of what to give Will. Most of the ones he already chose were significant things, and Hannibal is not one to gift half-heartedly. Wine bottles are for hosting acquaintances. Dinner on a Friday is feeding himself and others, each night equally remarkable and mundane - cooking is a necessity. Will is better at picking dogs than Hannibal can hope to be, and while he certainly could bring him handfuls of fish, Will Graham is a capable fisherman in his own right, throwing trout and salmon to Hannibal with practiced ease, and Hannibal wanting to challenge him to the next thing swimming in black waters below.

He only can think to start his list over, in a better understanding of what Will needs but also wants. He starts out strong, wishing it were possible to offer him a daughter.

This too ends up being as agreeable as a stork to a maiden, for far more literal reasons.

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Prison is the most boring place to be contrived in modern iterations. A stretch rack or a cave oubliette would not be amiss to spice the place up. The federal detention center that he is consigned to before his trial is an exercise in sitting in isolation for days at a time, being allowed out long enough to clean himself, but otherwise doing most activities from the confines of the cell. Hannibal supposes it's not all bad - he gets opportunities to speak with his attorney regularly, and the warden and correctional officers are exceedingly wary of giving him a hard time after a couple weak attempts early in his stay.

(*You didn't really do much - the warden gives you the lecture of one who thinks they will be able to yell their way into your submission, only to find that your unflinching smile and polite "of courses" and "certainly nots" are frightening when combined with your stillness and confidence. They've robbed you of your leopard spots, but you are still a leopard.*)

Not receiving news in a timely manner is his actual grievance. He is certain Margot and Alana will not cross him, and that he merely need wait out this liminal space until after the trial. He can have a more interesting vantage at that point, assuming no one kills him at the courthouse, or Frederick truly cannot make a jury of Hannibal's peers think he is crazy as crazy comes in exchange for a book opportunity.

From an academic perspective, he knows there's a number of things that will need to happen before he stands in front of a judge, but he wishes he could observe it himself. Evidence gathering, depositions, character witnesses, jury selection, sealing off all the little corners Hannibal could retreat to like the smart animal he is. What he would give to be able to make remarks from inside Jack Crawford's interview. He would pull one of his own eyeteeth in exchange to see Will try and make his own mouth look less bloody these days.

He'll get to see them all in their due time. He's settled on this course of waiting from the moment he surrenders outside of Will's house. He carried small fish back and forth for the better part of a year as a child. He waited a decade to avenge his sister as a younger man. He can wait longer for something that loves him as he is, now fully realized and grown.

---

Metcalfe is very anxious to meet after Will's deposition, appearing on what he knows to be a Friday afternoon just after lunch.

(*Meal du jour - spaghetti, some dehydrated meat in the sauce. Wilted greens, origin unknown. Bland fruit salad, mostly under ripe cantaloupe. Hard white roll and a pat of butter. Hard pass on all of it for you, save the fruit which is passably flavorless and ignored easily.*)

As the primary obstacle to Hannibal successfully getting an insanity plea deal, Metcalfe's anxiousness makes sense. If anyone is going to say Hannibal knew exactly what he did, it's Will. The confidence in that is gratifying. Unfortunately, Metcalfe is also going to have to use some broad strokes in court on Will that Hannibal knows the man will not like. The deposition will give them a ground to start on. That Will delays it by a week is a curious thing.

When he is brought to the consultation room, the one place that he is afforded free reign to speak with the attorney, Hannibal gives a polite smile, sitting very straight and trying to not look as anticipatory of news from Will as he is.

Metcalfe, a man of imminent practicality and expediency, says, "Mail's here."

In his hand, a purple greeting card that he pulls from his portfolio, unopened and unmarked on the exterior.

"This before the deposition information?" asks Hannibal. "Really, Byron, I hardly think a sympathy card from someone with a chip on their shoulder is the priority of our next two hours," he says.

"It's from today's subject, if that changes your mind."

It does. Hannibal opens it with a measured finger, tearing as cleanly along the fold as he can. He misses his scalpel. It's an ugly card, truly heinous and cheap, which Hannibal suspects is a casualty to Will's need to have some sort of eating implement on the front and less so an intentional thing. The spoon, a baby spoon, sports lettering above it - ***"You have a new daughter!"***

So something related to Abigail. Hannibal deserves probably a thousand such reminders, but the fact that Will would take the risk to make one now seems out of character. The puzzle grows stranger when he opens it, expecting more than what he gets in text.

**What do you know about storks?** it says inside in Will's rushed hand.

Incidentally, Hannibal thinks, eyes going soft but hands pinching tightly at the bottom of the card to keep his grip, not that much more from when he was six. Science, probability, and disdain for folk superstitions tell Hannibal that there's nothing to them - just migratory birds that nest in recurring locations and are given more social importance than they actually merit. Messy. Bad for fireplace maintenance. Very common throughout Europe, though uncommonly dense in Lithuania.

Nonetheless, the specificity of it brings to mind carrying fish for the first time to the side of the castle, anxious, anticipatory.

"Get this," says Metcalfe, smiling like he's got the finest gaff to share, taking a seat and bringing out a typed transcript and pocket recorder. "Graham brought an actual baby to the deposition. All seven hours of it."

Impossible, Hannibal thinks to himself, even with the vividness of spires and chimneys in his mind's eye, little bundles of sticks rounding them with nests. Surely there's a more logical reason than Will's card implies. Surely this is a mean taunt of his allegiance to some woman that Hannibal hasn't been in the country to learn of.

(*Your chest hurts at the idea. For you, there is no other than him.*)

It's all so careful though - no signatures, kept for him to see and no one else. Will Graham doesn't think he should have children. Will Graham doesn't identify with the concept of family. Will Graham kisses with an honest, hateful mouth, and Hannibal can't imagine him lying in a moment of what felt like uncompromised truth by hiding affection for another.

He reads Will's writing again, and dares not think it's true.

“What is her name?” asks Hannibal, after what must be an uncomfortable length of time.

“Hold up, I think…” he checks his notes, with a kind of hurried shame, not the thing he thought he’d need to review specifically for today’s session. “Beatrice. He called her Beatrice a few times during session breaks. Good guess on it being a girl - did you know about it before now?”

*Ah*, thinks Hannibal as the force of a smile comes across his face, *Paradise at last.*

---

He is still thinking at lights out, staring up into the dull grey of the ceiling where he knows beyond is a vernal sky full of stars and cold air, feeling out every piece of forsaken foam and seamline in the prison mattress: *I am not willing to stay here beneath Purgatory.*

# who's in my family?

The manila envelopes that Will has tried to ignore more or less reveal Beatrice Graham, once proven the rightful recipient of Hannibal Lecter's fortune, can buy a private island somewhere in the Maldives with a mansion and a few elephants for her entertainment, assuming that children under the age of a full year old have any interest in those sorts of things. Even Will is a bit stunned at what he's looking at, rows and rows of numbers and balance.

He contemplates if the proper and fair rebuttal to Hannibal's "Eat the Rude" should be "Eat the Rich", considering his own humble upbringing. He knew Hannibal was doing well, but he underestimated just how well someone with inherited funds and no debt right out of medical school could do over the course of 20 years.

(*You fight back the temptation to shove it all back in the envelope and bury it - you have a house, you have your savings, you know you could do as well or better than your father ever did. But it's not wrong for Hannibal to want to do the same. You have to remind yourself, looking over statement after statement, it's not wrong, it's not illegal or perverse or mean-spirited the way so much between the two of you has been.*)

It's assuredly more than either of them ever needs - Beatrice can go to college and drop out to reapply as many times as she wants, and Will should probably buy her a nicer stroller than he was originally contemplating. (*You are perfectly happy to carry her everywhere, but even your anxiety at not having her in your hands concedes it would be practical.*) If she just leaves it alone, she could just be a wealthy heiress living on the annual gains from the account. No wonder Metcalfe didn't want the portfolio to go to reparations in civil court.

One of the envelopes with another generous pile of statements has the paternity test ready to go within it, the little innocuous swab and sealed protective pouch waiting to be opened. Will eyes it hatefully.

Here lies the account that Will can see is tied to Lecter Castle, and unfortunately entailed to Hannibal through right of reclamation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This portion

of Hannibal's history is the only part that he doesn't appear to have personally worked for, money and properties associated with his Uncle Robertus in France and various heirlooms and bond investments. Here lies the account that has a living family member associated with it, that he will have to play nice with and mutually agree to never mention their connection is a man who thinks flaying people for fancy lardons is the pinnacle of haute cuisine.

How important is it for Beatrice to own an old castle? He's already mentally promised her a horse if that's what she wants, because she now apparently has horse girl money, but is the castle with all the towers and gables and severely cursed history necessary? Hannibal hated it enough to not be willing to ever go back. Will's left a corpse in the basement on the off-chance he ever does, but he guesses that gets to be his problem if it's found after all.

(*Imagine that conversation: "Yes officer, there's a man made into a stained glass firefly in the wine cellar of my daughter's decrepit inherited mansion, but consider the* ***emotional*** *meaning behind it rather than the forensic one before you judge."*)

Maybe much like Will hesitates to throw away anything that Hannibal tries to entail to their child, Hannibal also feels the need to allow her an opportunity to decide what to do with it. It's the metaphorical junk drawer that follows you from move to move, a box full of things that you might have use for later, and broken things that you don't but dare not throw away. Will can think of keepsakes and photos in the shoebox in the hallway he'll never look at again, but can't bear to part with them. Is it wrong for Hannibal to have the same?

Even if it's not a place to keep close in his thoughts anymore, it's saved for his family, something he promised Will and something belonging to Beatrice by irreplaceable right.

He pops the package open, swab rolling onto the table.

"Can you make me some good bubbles?" he asks Beatrice.

Beatrice, an absolute master of spitting on herself before meals, happily complies, and was likely complying long before being asked. She makes sure to get her hand in on it too and grab for Will's bare neck when he tries to wipe her face, because much like her other father, she never saw a surface area that couldn't use some unnecessary elaboration, and Will is her favorite canvas.

(*Or couldn't use some unnecessary body fluids; those too.*)

She gives a small smile at the tickling of the swab, and Will tries to take that as some sort of sign that it's meant to be and he's not totally ruining her. Lecter is a heavy name to have these days, even if it's not written on anything else other than his heart.

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They have a couple quiet days. Thank god, the universe, or the untameable call of the void, whoever makes these big decisions - Will doesn't think he could handle yet another emotional experience in such a short time window. He's already concerned his adrenal glands and kidneys are going to give out with the shock of all the gifts and pronouncements he's been receiving of varying importance, and that's ignoring all bodily injuries he has also received in his tenure as Hannibal's favorite bone to cut his teeth on.

Nothing of note happens on the Tuesday after Hannibal calls other than Will making the walk down the drive to send Beatrice's very valuable spit with a courier for the law firm, who assures him they'll have expedited results this week. The two of them make lunch. (*Formula, because of course, a bad cup of stale tea, and canned chicken and dumpling soup.*) They clean approximately 30% of the laundry. (*100% is not possible. You haven't seen the bottom of the hamper in two weeks, which is unfortunate because all your court clothes are there.*) They go with the dogs on another walk together, and amble down to the stream for Will to watch the silver-green flash of bass working their way to spawn downstream, and Beatrice sleeps in her sling, dead to the world in the milk-drunk stupor of infants that Will envies.

It's worth missing his own time to rest for the little bit of peace being out of the house brings. He could probably use a visit from someone that's not unduly interested in his legal proceedings, but the plethora of mommy forums he doom scrolls through on his phone through seem to indicate this is a normal feeling, even if Will insists that birds aren't allowed to designate gender roles, and he's distinctly not a mom. Still, it's lonely, and routine eats away the days.

Wednesday and Thursday pass in similar simplicity. No Margot, no Jack, no lawyers, and (*to your secret disappointment*) no Hannibal, the small black phone sitting in idleness at the end of the kitchen counter and without disruption. He reads *Pat the Bunny* for what is surely the

five-hundredth time in just shy of three weeks. He orders more onesies online in anticipation of her growing too big for the ones she has soon, though in the impossible depths of the hope chest, there may very well be some already provided.

He survives a nighttime bout of baby colic again, but only just barely, looking more racoon-eyed than ever before. Will hasn't been this sleep deprived since the encephalitis, but he's not cold and sweating through his clothes, so this is a marked improvement. A pair of robins land on the outside bannister to sing to each other in the evenings, and he spends the better part of ten minutes trying to prop the baby's head up to see if she can follow their movements with her new eyes.

(*You think she does. You think she doesn't. Hannibal would probably know, but Hannibal would probably also say it's an automatic response to stimuli in his clinical way, and you really just want to share something with her, and he's not here, so you decide yes she does.*)

Friday is less idyll and without news. Not quite to the extent that he is being gifted additional children, though if Will ever sees that stork again he swears he's going to take a page out from his fellow parent's book and eat it, but the day is not three days of no one but the baby to keep him company, so it should count. The discovery phase on Hannibal's case ends on Friday. Will knows it does, because Metcalfe calls him again to tell him so on the ill-gotten cell phone.

Will very nearly jumps clear out of his armchair at the sound of the ringtone's shrill chime, startling at least half the pack and the baby as his leg jerks up.

"Can't talk much about it, obviously," comes the attorney's voice over the receiver, waspish about Will's repeated requests for him to speak up, and that he can't hear him over the furious infant, even if it's Will's fault and not the phone's. "But we've received all of the prosecution's evidence and testimonies and we're moving forward. You were the only holdout since the initial arraignment."

Will snorts, fussing with a pacifier and the clip with his free hand to give to Beatrice. She accepts it, and promptly spits it back out, where it swings like an old rotary phone cord. "Are...you calling to complain that I made your job harder but now it's fine?"

An irritated sigh. “No, actually it’s been way harder since our last encounter. I don’t think I’ve ever been more in contact with a foreign embassy in my entire life, almost all entirely today.”

“Shouldn’t take on clients with dual citizenship and a penchant for murder and mayhem if you don’t want the cosmopolitan version of it,” Will huffs.

Metcalfe hums into the receiver. “Incidentally," he says, dragging the word out, "the actual topic of conversation is that your daughter is why I have been corrected on multiple pronunciations today, not the good doctor. Paternity test came back a match, and congrats, you’re about to be the proud power of attorney for a bunch of properties that you literally need a translator and an estate planner for across a few European nations in that third account I was talking about. I’m calling because I need you to come in and sign things for it with a notary present and the other beneficiary.”

There’s a pause in the conversation, Metcalfe waiting for some kind of confirmation, maybe a thank you, and Will waiting for his voice to come back.

*It came back a match, congrats.* Like that’s not a confirmation in and of itself.

It’s weird to have it confirmed, even if it’s not needed for him. Will’s known it was true from the moment he accepted Beatrice was going to be his, like it was written in the curve of her cheek or closed blue eyes. It’s uncomfortable to have someone else in on it, though. It was a secret for him, and someone’s gone through and written down something that he thought was whispered and quiet. Even the creature that brought her knew to keep its knowledge safe and unmarked. Redacted - a word to resent, but to protect as well.

(*There’s so little that’s private about you and Hannibal these days, but this was something you had for yourself - you could pretend she was there between you, a sheltered silent nest, the snow outside cold but the three of you suspended in a soft time and so warm-warm-* ***warm*** -)

He swallows.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he says. “I’m not sure how to be subtle about it though, if that makes a difference - the baby’s kind of a major production at any location other than home, and you’re Hannibal’s only means to talk with people while he’s got a no-contact order placed against him.”

Not that Hannibal or him have been paying it much mind. Par for the course where they’re concerned, Will thinks, and smiles.

“Sunday morning,” Metcalfe jumps right at it, “if you can. Less foot traffic, and the other beneficiary is staying nearby and very persistent about when they can meet with you and the kid and move along. I’ll have to twist the embassy’s arm to get a representative for their documentation, but we can get the notary, no problem.”

“What’s the rush?” Will asks, feeling disconcerted. There’s no practical reason Sunday won’t work, unless he wants to beg off as having plans, but his plans are still pretty much the same every day. *Oh we couldn’t possibly,* he’d say. *Disruptions to staring into space between nodding off and burping the baby to the tune of ‘Smoke on the Water’ is unthinkable.*

“I need to get these accounts under a new name pretty much yesterday, before anyone can flag them as Lecter’s property. People talk,” says Metcalfe, and there’s a shuffling noise on his end, like he’s pacing, considering something. Will gives him a moment before he continues, a little sheepish. “That and there’s some conditions from the grantor that come with there being a second beneficiary that I suspect you’ll want to go over.”

That doesn’t sound ideal.

“Patience is a virtue,” Will mutters with a frown, rubbing Beatrice’s back, ear to his phone.

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The second event of Friday is that the black phone rings again. Will presumes this will be Metcalfe with additional details or to reschedule because the Lithuanian Consulate has rightly told him to fuck off. Will has considered calling back to tell him much the same. He doesn’t

like the sound of "some conditions from the grantor", which is elaborate Hannibal-speak for some kind of Sisyphian task or obligation that nobody really wants to do.

"Still on for Sunday?" he says as soon as the receiver is to his ear, shuffling through the kitchen in search of something quick to eat. Beatrice sways in the sling, sighing into her fist crammed up in her face. It's a very relatable position - Will is certain that's where he's mentally been many times in the last decade.

"Hello," comes the reply, flat, electronic. Will's stomach turns like it intends to roll out somewhere near his kidneys and to the floor. (*Maybe through that scar you idly trace, a habit you fall into when you stare at the ceiling, listening to the whistling breath of the baby and the quiet snores of the elderly dogs in the pack. They say the more you pick at something, the worse it gets.*)

Mercilessly, it continues. "You are about to receive a call from Hannibal Lecter, an inmate housed at the Chesapeake Detention Facility. Before accepting this collect telephone call, please be advised that accepting a collect call will cost you more than it would if you prepaid for this collect call." The prices are rattled off, a pittance next to the value of what's on the other side. The choice to decline or accept is tendered with only the distance of a few numbers to keep them separate, like the decision to do either is equally simple.

He answers, because Will is probably criminally stupid if not an actual proper criminal.

(*You've done it once before - the seal's broken, so you might as well enjoy the contents.*)

"Checking in on the progress with the legal technicalities, Doctor Lecter?" Will says with a cheekiness that he doesn't feel. Beatrice burrows until she's just a nose and eye, peeking out from the fleece, heavy as a stone around his neck. Her weight is centering.

"I find progress stalls in most arenas where legality comes into play. Banal rules have a way of ruining one's fun," is the biting reply, all Hannibal at its core. "You'll have to forgive my lapses in between on account of it. How is my favorite investment doing today?"

Will finds himself smiling despite himself. “Favorite already? I didn’t think you had seen it before. Maybe it behaves badly at odd hours. Certainly leaves messes to clean up,” he adds, pulling her spit-wet hand away from her visible eye.

“I mean my ongoing one, but I will be very gratified to meet the newest addition when I can, circumstances as they are.”

If he can goes unsaid, but Will hears it anyway.

“Stretched a bit thin,” Will replies. “But that’s not really out of spec for it.”

“Yes, you have been put through your paces, haven’t you?”

Will can feel his name at the end of that. *Haven't you, Will?* It’s disorienting in its absence, but familiar to be teased so. He gets tired of being teased like this sometimes, but he’s also realizing this might be a rare commodity very shortly after more than a year of abundance.

But also, *fuck you Hannibal*, comes the thought. Fuck him for making Will jump, and then being sorry to find Will didn’t like it. Fuck him for creating this awkward liminal space where everything is on hold and everything is moving forward, and Will has to choose which stream to fall into.

(*They could sentence him to death. You like to think they can’t, like it’s executing a rare animal for being what it is, but even zoo tigers are put to death for mauling people when the opportunity arises, and Hannibal has never seen an opportunity that he didn’t grab with claws, jaws, and his terrible sense of destiny.*)

“Is this a call with a particular question, or are we just antagonizing today?” Will says, frog in his throat. “Getting your kicks...your updates in before the evening pill schedule starts? Chloral hydrate is a hell of a night’s rest,” he seethes. "I'd know."

“You seem upset,” comes the sardonic reply. “Very naughty, I shall have to tell your supervisor when he visits next.”

“I often am,” Will says with a hysterical ‘hah’ of breath between thin lips at the end, and shakes his head. “It’s not everyday you take on major life changes with a mad man at the helm.”

“I’ve been reliably informed several times I’m out of my right mind, and who am I to disagree with public opinion?” Hannibal gives a little hum, considering. Will wishes he could see his face. “But that is neither here nor there. Only a matter of time at this point - I hope it has not been too late to set things up on your end, though Byron has been very committed to his tasks beyond the defense. I’d ask you to have some patience with him. His clients are very trying, me especially.”

Will snorts again, but his face softens quickly with a glance down at Beatrice, staring up at him quietly. She has a dog hair from Harley on her little blonde brows, and he uses his own rough broad thumb to remove it, heart softening.

Threaded in that, Will does pick up something he’s not been told yet, and knows to be the greatest falsehood Hannibal has ever perpetrated on humanity - he’s pleading not guilty.

“Reliably informed” he’s out of his right mind indeed. Nobody’s ever been more confident in the righteousness of their sins, that they are perpetrating justice in sinew and pain and reshaped flesh. Nobody’s ever been as competent and aware of what they are doing than Hannibal Lecter, cataloguing every detail as he does it, bottling and labelling memories to keep, wrapping muscle and organs as butchers do with the heat of a skillet in his mind’s eye. It's absolutely ridiculous to him that Hannibal would be anything but irrevocably *present*.

“I’ll be sure to let him know you were on your best behavior tonight,” Will finally says. “Difficult thing, not being in your right mind.”

“You'd know," he echoes. "Just mind your tasks, as you always do,” says Hannibal, “and I’ll ensure I mind mine. After all, the weekend’s here,” he adds, with a lightness that belies a hidden emotion, here at the end of the call. “Time to have some time to yourself.”

Will smiles again, and shares a long glance with Beatrice, who gives him another sigh, listening to him in what must be some kind of recognition, memorizing what little she can. He hopes his face isn't too sad.

"No rest for the wicked," he finishes, and hangs up first.

Messages received, recording gauntlets allegedly passed, tacit agreement to not poke at each other for the night reached. He feels a little guilty to make him blow one of his few chances to talk to someone outside the detention center on such a bitter, sniping note, but maybe Hannibal shouldn't reach for things that are bitter if he wants sweet.

(*You've never advertised yourself to be anything but what you are, save maybe less violent, and he saw through that too.*)

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Sunday morning comes too quickly, with a groggy start over the coffee maker that doesn't really make coffee as much as half-heartedly dribble tepid water over the coffee grounds, and then have the nerve to steam when he goes to check the reservoir. He probably doesn't have time to fix that, and resigns himself to a rough first half of the day. It's not operating a samovar at four in the morning kind of complicated, with Hannibal handing off freshly brewed cups in his housecoat like Will hasn't had a seizure hours before and is inviting himself over to calm down, but not many things are, thankfully.

(*He was happy to see you, you think. You don't know if he knew about the encephalitis yet - just that he was honestly pleased you sought him out. You wanted someone to tell you that you were sick, so you could stop worrying about it. Hannibal wanted to give you a cup of coffee and tell you not to worry about it anyway, diagnosis as an aside. Outside of your control, no need to spin the wheels here. Just old fashioned PTSD.*)

(*Is it really different now?* )

Will ponders what the expectations are - notarizations are a dime a dozen, but since there's someone of actual importance that will recognize Beatrice as a relative of Hannibal in this

encounter, he finds himself tucking her into her little plaid dress and red socks, and considering the best strategy to keep the front of it clean for the hour drive into the city. She goes into the car seat after a bottle with relative ease, but not before trying to kick her way out of having her feet put into shoes, and Will takes advantage of her immobility by quickly dressing in a proper button-up and blazer over his jeans. It will have to do, as the only trousers he has are dying a quiet death under a mound of linens.

The beneficiary in question will just have to accept their new relatives with grace - Will is a first generation college graduate who fishes and fixes motors as a hobby, and Beatrice is a product of him, even if Hannibal *is* technically the father. Beatrice's sneering face as of right now might be from gas, but it's still Will's, and the two of them are whatever the hitherto unknown birds above have decided they're going to be.

It's not a bad drive. It's a mercy to be able to go before people are done with their brunches, or their church services, or whatever it is that middle-class America does on the Christian sabbath. Beatrice is still and sleepy, dozing through the early morning sunshine and the green countryside between Virginia and Baltimore's city limits. It reminds him of the stretches between towns in the midwest and the south alike, small towns trying to sequester themselves from the cities coming closer year after year. The transition between the beech and oak trees into the rises of townhomes and office buildings and arenas feels less jarring now that he's not on his way to therapy, or to a crime scene.

They could go to the aquarium, if he really wanted. Bea's not old enough to really take anything other than the noise and the calm dark of the blue walkways, maybe listen to lorikeets in the canopy of the Australia exhibit, but it's something they could do that's different and that can just be theirs. They could go to Patterson Park, and enjoy sitting by the fountains, or the spiralling central tower, or just listen to the ducks and the geese on the lawns between the ponds. There's nothing saying either of them has to be at home, safely hidden in the banality of the name "Graham", and the anonymity of a large city.

They arrive downtown 20 minutes too early. Being a sadist apparently, Will drives by Hannibal's townhouse instead, the Mount Vernon area well within easy driving range, and a familiar drive besides. The brownstone is strange and vacant in the morning sunlight, the white square of a condemnation letter from the city pasted to the front entry's door. A chain link fence has been erected around the stoop to keep people from vandalizing the property.

The legal documents indicate this is not held in a trust, wholly separate from them now, save for Will's memories of bleeding out on the floor of the kitchen. This can belong to a series of bad memories spread across people other than Will: Alana, Jack, Abigail, the paramedics

who struggle to know what to do with this kind of violence, the police officers whose six months of academy is never going to fully prepare them for a proper slaughterhouse. This can belong to the state of Maryland, unhindered by inheritance, and titles, and the complication that no one knows exists in the small person sitting calmly in her car seat, just within sight of his rearview mirror. A bank can reclaim it, or the county can auction it and parse it out for the survivors of people who were in the wrong place in the wrong attitude.

In another time and future, this could have been home. The second floor hall bedroom made into a pretty little nursery, socked feet padding up and down the staircase, the grandness of a kitchen filled with chef's appliances humbled by warming a bottle in hot water over low heat. He could have sat in the chair near the wine pantry, nesting Beatrice into his arm, listening to the rhythmic preparation of a rice mejadra's fried onions, drinking a red wine that is too strong while she finishes off the remnants of her formula. They both sleep well - there are no dangers save the one that locks the doors when daughter and father nod off together.

(*No dangers to you and her - but everything that passes through the pantry and wine racks is subject to terrible violence, and you don't know if you care anymore. You care what he did to* ***you*** *but not the others when you consider it truthfully.*)

They pull away from the curb - Beatrice unaware of anything other than a brief stopping of the car, and Will keeping his hands glued to the steering wheel, not to his belly where the scar is burning, seven times hotter than fire, and that there is no air, and that this is just a beautiful hell that they've left behind.

He can discard the memory - it's not a real one anyway. He can just go to the aquarium, and watch the fish, and make a new one with her.

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The offices of Metcalfe and Associates are every bit as posh as he suspected they would be, nestled into an attractive brick and glass monstrosity along the waterfront. He valets his car, because he can't picture carrying the baby from the parking garage down the street to here, but he's assured by the driver that it should be no problem, that he's expected, and to just phone the secretary at the front desk when he was ready to go and they'll pull the car back around to the front.

He says thank you, because he doesn't know what else to say.

He goes to the elevator, and a man holds the door for him, another unexpected pleasantry. "What floor?" he asks, a little slovenly, but Will figures maybe he's just on his way to pick something up from the neighboring offices. It's Sunday after all, and an unbuttoned collar is hardly a sin. Will's wearing jeans with sneakers for Christ's sake.

"Second, I think," he says, shuffling the baby's weight.

"The law firm?" the guy asks to confirm, weighing Will's appearance from underneath thick tortoiseshell glasses. He has a peculiar attentiveness that sets him on edge, and Will finds himself checking again that Bea is covered, silent underneath a veil of printed dandelion heads on soft cotton linen. It's becoming second nature to do this - he used to not be so paranoid.

"As opposed to all the other businesses on the second floor?" he asks, and doesn't get much argument after that.

Next time he'll take the stairs. Next time he'll swing his ancestral home money weight like a cudgel, and just make them all come to him. There must be some kind of benefit hiding behind all this wealth - right now it's just inconvenience, papered in terms and conditions and revisiting places he doesn't want to be.

Jurgen Schreiber, much like Byron Metcalfe, is very obliging once Will enters the lobby on what should be a day that the office is closed. He is tall, white haired and bearded, has the most outrageous German accent, and is very careful to make sure that Will is provided for. Sparkling water offered? Check. Directions to the restroom? Check. And offer to come and do an overview of the best areas to invest Beatrice's money over the next ten years for sustainable growth? Check, check, double check. No wonder Hannibal has such a lordly disposition if everyone he cares to do business with is so attentive - Will wonders what he even saw in someone like himself, constantly nettled and ready to argue.

(*Thorny plants can be beautiful too.*)

“I’d really just like to sign off on whatever needs to be done and go home,” he lies, not even wanting to do that. “Babies aren’t notorious for their patience, absurd Baltic heritages or not.”

Schreiber nods at this, as does Metcalfe who looks sick in the way that nervous people often do. It’s subtle, just the downturn of his mouth, eyes looking from the conference room door to him. None of them should be here technically, and every minute that passes is a compromise of their character in court. They have played host to the other beneficiary for minutes too long already, only ten of them into the projected meeting time.

“Of course, Mr. Graham, if you’d like to step in here we can begin.”

When he does step into the glassy-walled meeting room, slick leather chairs pushed in save for one in the far side of the room, Will takes stock of three people already at the table.

A mousy looking woman with her notary book waves, cheerful in her Sunday morning teal finest - Will is charmed by the silver of a lily pin at her lapel, and the collection of three fountain pens in her breast pocket.  Another woman, in tidy black pinstripe and a forest green blouse smiles benignly -  he takes this to be the representative from the Lithuanian consulate, only just turned away from a conversation in her elaborate, biting language with the third person in the room.

“Oh for the love of god,” Will swears, and sets down Beatrice’s carrier as carefully as he can before slumping into a visitor’s chair to push his hands into his face.

The third person is Chiyoh, who, picture perfect as always, offers what is probably the most inscrutable smile this side of the Atlantic, more so than her older cousin-brother-conspirator by marriage, porcelain flat and beautiful.

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That Hannibal would have seen to Chiyoh’s general comfort, despite sticking her in a castle to act like a tower maiden gone feral, is not a surprise. She obviously wasn’t selling poultices and spells to afford her life in the countryside of Lithuania - somebody was paying for basic

necessities. Will refuses to think she was literally eating unseasoned pheasants for the better part of 20 plus years unattended, gathering herbs in the woods. Capable of it? Yes. Actually foregoing literally everything about modern life and shopping, and churning her own butter? No.

She wore eyeliner when they met for god's sake.

(*You would, however, be a lot more forgiving if she had been - you would **also** throw someone from the back of a moving vehicle at your first opportunity if you experienced the same.*)

"Oh good," says Metcalfe. "So you know each other."

"Oh good," says Will, just on the edge of flat-toned and irritated. "And here I was thinking I might have to make introductions."

Metcalfe and Schreiber look at each other, pin straight in their suits, looking vaguely like they would have preferred to be literally anywhere other than here on a Sunday. Will concurs. "We don't need to drag this out, since Mrs. Mazeika here has been very obliging in meeting us before her Sunday mass," Schreiber says, pulling pens out and a dossier with the presumed documentation of importance.

"What was it that I needed to go over?" Will asks with growing dread, balancing a pen between his thumb and index finger. "You said that the, ah, grantor had some terms and conditions that applied. Figure it's good to ask, before I sign something. No independent legal representation, and so on," Will snipes.

"Chiyoh Iekami is entitled to a property in Paris, and 20% of the Lecter Trust account's earnings," Schreiber says with a nod. "Perfectly reasonable next to Miss Graham's primary stake."

Will can deal with that. Chiyoh's kind of getting a raw deal, if the other two trusts are something to go by. It's also a revelation to hear the burbling saliva creature that is his daughter referred to as "Miss" anything.

"She's also as Doctor Lecter's only living kin granted custody rights in the event of your death - obviously open to being contested by your family, Mr. Graham, though the trust would have to be held by a protector."

Will is...less inclined to deal with that, and not in a great position to elaborate on the why in front of Hannibal's entire suite of lawyers, an international official, a notary, and Chiyoh herself.

Chiyoh of course knows full well, and gives him a flinty, dark eyed smile. It's not mean, but certainly full of that good ol' "throw you from the back of something in motion" mischief.

“Not to worry, Will,” she says. “I have a much greater fondness for Hannibal’s child than you. Besides,” she adds, “it only makes sense I be the godmother - I was there when she was conceived, best I can tell. Seems like you do know there are other methods of persuasion after all.”

Will goes absolutely green at the implication, but also at the implication that the 30 day gestation of bird children is totally acceptable. If anyone was going to be a literalist, it was Chiyoh. Truly the world is mad, and Hannibal just its prophet or something equally over the top.

Will has to hand it to her - she’s not just a survivor. She’s a goddamn institution of resilience against Hannibal’s legal entanglements. He guesses Jack wouldn’t have known enough about her to send out any sort of APB for her arrest. There’s plenty to be suspicious of on the Verger Farm and the shot range of the bullets that take out a generous number of guards, but if Hannibal is willing to take the blame for it, the prosecution doesn’t seem inclined to follow it much further than that.

However, in the course of the two months since Hannibal’s arrest, Chiyoh has not had much time to be the independent woman she should be at this point. A new baby on the family bankroll probably comes as something of a surprise, avian delivery notwithstanding.

(*You had been so sure you were helping her, liberating her from a duty she had been deceived into taking. You had been so sure she would understand that Hannibal didn’t do right by her*

*the way he didn't do right by you, and she would just go be whatever it was she had been deprived of being. But blood of the family and loyalty to Hannibal's aunt seems to be what Chiyoh has crafted her foundations on, and she will not be shaken by some half-hearted, feckless man from across the sea like you.*)

Will wonders how Hannibal contacted her, only that he must have somehow. How many coded phone calls can you make from a federal penitentiary without someone catching on, anyway?

She doesn't have anywhere to go, seemingly living in hotels and waiting for Will to come to some sort of a decision. She signs her agreement to Beatrice's inclusion in the family estate without hesitation, politely thanking the embassy agent and the lawyers with her small voice. Will notes she also looks at the baby carrier with something like that curious longing Margot had, as though she can't imagine what it's like to have a child, only that she would like to hold it.

Will can sympathize with that - Will can accept that underneath all the smoky eyes and hard ass gun training and bird hunting, there's a soft person under the skin that has lacked basic human interaction. Not by choice, as Hannibal did, but by her own decision making, and Beatrice is a wide open field that she doesn't know how to run through.

"Would you like to meet each other?" he asks. "You're cousins now, or whatever he's got you down as to get around the rules."

Chiyoh, usually very bitter with him, gives the baby a couple of fingers to grab with a silent nod when Will pulls back the blanket to show a wide eyed girl shuffling her little feet at the change in brightness.

Will, considering her little hardshell suitcase and the long container that he knows holds an impressive scoped rifle, offers her a ride and a place to sleep, because he's been this person before. A more compassionate one, if rough at the edges.

"I have absolutely nothing in the guest bedroom but a bed and a lamp," he explains. "And the baby wakes up every two to three hours without fail in the downstairs areas, but there's internet and it's quiet when you're not catching the afternoon meltdown."

It's enough for her, she says, and he has no doubt that's true. He doesn't know anyone more acclimated to less than she.

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In some respects, Chiyoh is not the worst thing to happen this year, which is more of a testament to Will's life and less to Chiyoh's work ethic or commitment to protecting Hannibal. This is in spite of her dedicated attempts to join this prestigious list. She has made every effort by guns, trains, her suspiciously serene attitude towards him moments before trying to injure him, and now by legally becoming the equivalent of a godmother to his child.

(*"You...didn't stand on the porch or anything, right?" you ask. "When you came and helped Hannibal get back to my house?" She just looks up and out the windshield, likely praying to die, and not ever letting you know*.)

However, she *has* ended up like a black cat crossing his path, an omen that appears hours or days before something properly awful is going to happen. The merest glimpse of her shiny perfect hair and tailored appearance is as good as walking under a dozen ladders, or spilling salt without throwing it over his shoulder by the shovelful to ward off bad luck.

So of course he's opposed to her appointment to potential guardianship - the woman literally threw him out of a caboose after kissing him. Who trusts that kind of person?

(*Probably the same kind of idiot that fornicates with the man that stabs you in the gut, but you don't feel like diving into that particular pool of self-reflection today.*)

With Will's luck insofar as she's involved, her arrival is a portent of doom that ensures he (*finally*) dies in some dramatic fashion, and she'll run off with the baby into the woods like some kind of bog witch to train his daughter in how to be a tricky, cryptic asshole and shoot big guns and presumably recognize scents blindfolded by burning sage or whatever the hell Hannibal did as an unsupervised teenager with matches.

Well, actually, that sounds kind of amazing. He might be able to get behind that scenario - a pyrrhic victory for Beatrice.

Tragic orphan origin stories aside, Will finds himself opening the door to his house to Chiyoh midday on Sunday with the kind of trepidation saved for dentist appointments and jury duty. The baby carrier is heavy in the one hand, but Beatrice is happily burbling along, socked foot bouncing at the edge with total obliviousness to Chiyoh's demesne of dread.

They're going to get along great once Chiyoh's dispatched him, Will thinks with a sigh at the baby.

Chiyoh, for her part, looks around the inside of Will's house with the assessing eyes of one thinking the best way to either renovate it entirely, or escape out the window on a moment's notice. Both seem likely where she's concerned, but after a moment's reflection on the bed in the living room and the functional network of baby cleaning and feeding stations throughout the space, she nods. It's not her first time here, but perhaps the first time inside, when it's inhabited. He thinks what conclusions she's drawn, and hopes they're not a reflection on him as a father.

(*This one place you can't bear to be poked. More than the need for violence. More than the need for the violent man that finds violence for you to get into.*)

"When does she eat next?" she asks, looking down to the carrier on Will's arm.

Will shrugs, looks at the general placement of the sun outside, and considers the bottle that was consumed with fury at the lawyer's office. "Maybe half an hour? She should have been asleep right now, but she doesn't always go down for the afternoon nap if she's disturbed."

"Hence the meltdowns," Chiyoh gives another spartan nod, and to Will's shock, heads directly into the kitchen to begin running the sink tap at the hottest setting. She ungloves her hands, removes her coat to reveal a practical grey sweater, and grabs for glass bottles like she's done it every day.

“You aren’t cleaning, are you?” Will asks hesitantly, unbuckling Beatrice from the seat and giving her a bounce for good measure to slot neatly into a side carry. Beatrice lolls her head into the crook of his arm, and kicks weakly as the dogs sniff at her red socks, tickling them. Chiyoh watches this with a curious attentiveness, the same kind she holds in the law firm. Will thinks of the dogs when a rabbit is in the yard - some only intrigued by it, others playful, and always one driven to chase.

(*You wonder which she is. You thought you knew, but maybe that’s only towards you.*)

“No, I’m just running the sink for the novelty of it,” she replies, face blank, but still watchful.

Will rolls his eyes, hefting Bea into the other arm to coo when Max licks her foot and noses at a sock when it falls to the floor. “You don’t have to do anything,” he says, feeling self-conscious of his mess. “I know you probably didn’t sign up for this anymore than you signed up for changing your agreement on the Lecter estate, and I’m hardly going to put you to work on removing milk rings from bottles that have sat on the counter too long when I should have done it myself.”

She fills the basin with water, seemingly reflecting on that.

“I don’t know what else I can do yet,” she admits, a little harsher than he sees that she means to be. “If you want to show me, maybe I can help. I’ve been asked to do what I can for the time being.”

Will can picture it: Hannibal finding his way to get in contact with her, or Metcalfe strong arming his own way into it by other means. Chiyoh, seemingly free in the advent of Hannibal’s ride with the marshals to jail, escaping from Will’s house before anyone can see her or connect the dots with the wide exit wounds through the heads of the Italian mafioso that are sprinkled down the road to the Verger Farm. *Oh Chiyoh, can you please see to Will? Can you help him out? He’s tired, and there’s a wide world out there, and you are purposeless these days aren’t you? We’re family, Chiyoh. Beatrice is your family too. We can make things different this time.*

Will guesses they can, if it’s meant well.

“Is that something you want?” he asks quietly. “Or is that something you think you’re supposed to do?”

She gives him another long look, plunging glass containers into the heat of the steaming sink water.

“I know you didn’t understand it, the first time,” she explains. “But maybe this time you will.” She grabs for the sponge, pulling up the sleeves of the sweater, not flinching at all when she puts a hand to the water.

"Hannibal is all that is left for me," she says into the steam. "What you saw was the aftermath of many happy years ended in a long duty. If there was deception in it's creation, I still chose to follow my own nature. What you *didn’t* see was the time before that choice, and his own duty to my lady and his kindness beyond the person we know him to be when the mood strikes him.”

“Doesn’t everyone have family that does things they wish they didn’t?” she asks, continuing, water falling from the inside of a bottle, her watching the bubbles of soap build beneath it. “Or perhaps for you it’s things that you wish they had done with *you.*”

(*Hunters have excellent vision, and she has always seen through you to the backstrap to the lungs for the clearest shot. She can gut you without it touching her. You are reflexively angry because she knows the best ways to take you down, and with none of Hannibal’s emotional attachment to you. Just another wolf on the other side of the gate, looking for a den.*)

“So I’d like to help,” she finishes.

(*Hunters, like dogs, are good gatekeepers.*)

And so Will shows her how to mix the formula when the dishes are done and he’s straightened up a space for her that’s a little more inviting, and the ways Beatrice best likes to be held, and watched as she sizes up the baby as a person who’s likely not seen much of them

other than in rare passing circumstances. Chiyoh is soft-spoken and careful. She is retreating and unobtrusive, if a little strong willed about things she'd like to do. That's good - she should be able to make those decisions.

It's still not who he wants in this duty and role, but it's someone that Hannibal owes it to, and Will guesses as family he owes it to as well. His daughter gets a castle **and** a knight, it seems, as befitting the newest and smallest lady of the manor.

# how to heal from distant, rejecting, or self-involved parents

Chiyoh is an unfairly fast learner - Will doesn't know if this is a symptom of being a woman and just having some sort of intuitive skill with children, or if she's actually a witch after all, but he's not one to throw out perfectly valid theories when he hears them. Inwardly, he knows he has met several women that actively disdain motherhood and the idea of subjecting themselves to archetypical female roles, and as such, Will is still favoring the witch theory. That's progressive, right?

Beatrice is not overly concerned with such things. She's Hannibal's child as well as Will's, and probably is completely undisturbed by the prospect of covenly beings in her family, and thinks of it as Chiyoh living her best life - if newborns are inclined to moral introspection and life goal validation. She certainly is very taken with Chiyoh's bright scarves, which is pretty much the same.

Will thinks maybe he's tired and reading too much into this.

"Relax," says Chiyoh, folding the pile of swaddling blankets into tidy squares the size of handkerchiefs. "Having a baby is hardly some secret club where they teach you the handshakes for the door. The world is full of people raising children with the help of others."

"Easy for you to say," Will says around Beatrice, squirming from her counter box while Will works on getting the sink clean and ready for bathtime. "You haven't had to do everything one handed for the last month, and then be told that you're making it harder than it should be."

All things considered, that sounds entirely on brand for him.

Chiyoh's not the type to roll her eyes, but she doesn't really need to, hands still folding in neat lines of laundry. The flat look she gets every time Will says something that aggravates her is really enough to communicate the idea, if not the motion. "But you are," she hums.

“Letting me take shifts with you isn’t magically making me more important than you to her. Just more familiar.”

(*You wince. It’s such a selfish thing to feel, but it’s in your fingers and your arms like an electric shock every time someone that isn’t you holds her.*)

Chiyoh, unlike Will, does have some grace about it. She leaves him to stew on that, instead finishing another fold of a daisy-printed blanket, smoothing it down with her hands.

“Where do you want me to take these?” she asks, gesturing to her completed work. The tidy pile of cozy linens looks like a pastel sandwich from here, totally at odds with his house and Chiyoh herself, who Will still struggles to think of without a rifle scope in hand. Everybody here is probably a terrible candidate for parenthood really, and whoever makes decisions about Will Graham’s and Hannibal Lecter’s cosmic family units should be drawn and quartered.

“Ah,” he says, scratching at the growing stubble on his face, “I guess the big wooden chest near the bed.”

The chest, yes, the chest, having done its very best to throw out his back upon moving it from the front of the house to the front room, has been a thorn in Will’s side. The idea of taking it further than the front room had been unthinkable in that first couple of days - what if he threw out his back? What if it fell on him like Dorothy's house in the Wizard of Oz? Will, already deeply preoccupied with the terror of having a baby in his house with no one to confirm to him that it’s a mistake, leaves it in the center of the room for several days. It's only Margot's visit, and the mental footnote that maybe the center of the room isn't the greatest spot for it if he'd like to keep his feet and legs un-maimed by it's majesty, that finally convinces him to shove his fishing rods out of the way, and push it close to the wall where he can reach it and the contents without having to walk all the way to the kitchen.

It shines now at him, menacingly well varnished. The balance of the room is off with it there, and there’s probably some kind of bad flow in the space happening as a result, but Will can’t be bothered to take it upstairs to the empty spare room without help, or a night of drinking to convince him he’s an independent man that doesn’t need any help and try anyway.

He has stubbed his toe on it on many an unfortunate late-night walk to the kitchen, caught the side of his knee on a particularly fine carved rosette on its top corner to the point of bruising it permanently, and generally can't find anything that he puts into it without having first removed all of the contents to the neighboring bed. He would avoid using it, but even he had to concede it is the safest place to put Beatrice's things when they're not in use. It's safe from dog hair and apparently the limbs of mankind, which shatter against its oak and cedar sides, making Will feel older than he actually is.

(*A quick count - three shoulder injuries, two thumbs slipped out of place more regularly than the average bastard to evade capture, a head scar that turns heads in a negative way, and one long and unkind fissure across your abdomen, like you've been stuffed to mount on a wall or in a museum. That you feel old is a consequence of your catalogued pains.*)

Chiyoh gives him a weird look, eyes looking across the space from the kitchen to the front room, and shrugs. Chiyoh always looks at Will like he's an idiot, so he pays it no further thought. She walks with her load of laundry in a basket, and disappears from view.

When Will makes his way back to the front room, wet baby wrapped in her hooded towel in hand, working at a pacifier like it has personally wronged her alongside Will for washing her head, he's irritated to see the laundry basket at the foot of the bed.

"Hmmf," says Will, blowing a raspberry on Beatrice's cheek.

No, he chides himself right after. Chiyoh's hardly the type to not finish a task to exacting completion, whether that means getting to snipe him in full view of a Florentine square, or sit alone in a sorry, mildewed house for the better part of two decades. Will reminds himself of this, sighing through his nose.

The chest's inner geometry is questionable at best, somewhere arms disappear to find things that Will knows damn well he put in there. There is no rhyme or reason to it's contents, and Chiyoh probably didn't know how he wanted it organized - conceding its demented order to him, not her own this time.

(*She has, however, reorganized your entire drinking glass cabinet in the name of fitting the glass bottles in with them - you find this out on Friday night when you go to grab one in a stupor and end up enjoying some water from one of Beatrice's prized four ounce blue colored*

*ones. You almost fancy a pour of scotch inside it, to complete the image of your navigational ineptitude and how vastly off the rails your life is, but shake it off. You just ask in the morning what else has been moved.*)

He grabs the daisy swaddle from the top, situates the baby into a diaper and a onesie, and digs out a corner in the sweet cedar-lined interior of the chest to place the rest of the clean laundry, where it will undoubtedly fall into chaos again. Buster noses at Will on the floor, and licks the baby's foot when it swings too close to the bed's edge. Will favors the embroidered lace swaddle from when she first arrives with a smile, little threads catching on his fingernails.

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On Monday, now familiar with the main tenets of the care of Beatrice Graham (*Lecter*) and having survived at least one blowout over a mid-morning nap stopped too soon by one of the dogs barking at a pair of turkey hens on the front lawn, Chiyoh insists on taking the afternoon feeding in full and the following nap.

The reason given when asked: "You are quantifiably obnoxious when you haven't slept."

Will shrugs. The equally important mid-morning nap interrupted makes for a cranky baby and a cranky father. "You're quantifiably obnoxious without someone to keep locked in the wine cellar," Will mutters mutinously, and tries to shake off the anxiety of leaving the two of them alone for very long.

"I'd still have a charge in the wine cellar had you not seen fit to let him loose," comes the side-eyed look from next to him in the kitchen, where Chiyoh diligently plaits long rolls of dough into a pretty yellow bread. (*Are all these misfit European children some kind of gourmand society, bent on your destruction? There's perfectly good white bread in the bread box, but no, it has to be* ***challah***.) "He might even be alive if you'd made sure there weren't bones strewn across the floor first, but alas, I am finding that organization is not your forte."

Unfair, thinks Will. She's the one who had been feeding him exclusively pheasant for god knows how long - *she* could have picked up the bones. Besides, he was undoubtedly going to die from scurvy, or high cholesterol, or kidney failure with his all meat diet, compatriot to the

murder of Mischa Lecter or not. However, she *did* let the dogs out for him this morning, and Will is somewhat inclined to peace.

Somewhat.

Holding a mug of coffee and letting the baby fretfully kick in the sling, Will turns to lean on the counter, edge digging into his sore spine. Perhaps sleeping in the armchair is not his best idea between cycles of infant activity.

“While I am well on my way to at least 18 years of being locked up with a person Hannibal has dropped on me, bear with me if I haven’t fully created an organization chart to keep track of things other than basic survival and avoiding legal pitfalls related to his trial,” he grumbles, and takes another sip of the coffee. It’s not even really warm at this point, or enjoyable, but something in his soul demands it.

“Go to bed, Will,” she huffs, and throws her plait onto a baking sheet.

Against personal preference, reasoning, and inclination, he does.

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Well, he does, but he doesn’t at first. He shuffles his way into the front room to the bed after Chiyoh hauls the bassinet away to put next to the kitchen and attend to the proofing of her fancy bread. Beatrice trades keepers, Chiyoh tying her to her side in the sling with the kind of casualness more befitting a Russian grandmother tending crops or another equally pastoral old country figure. Beatrice gives her usual round and glassy eyed burble, looking out at Will who tells her she’s pretty and she needs to be good.

(*You hate the image of the two of them together. You hate knowing that Hannibal, trapped in a prison cell and separated by years from the birth of his sister, is likely just as adept. Can you ever be this seamless with something that’s not violent? You thought fishing might be, but even that’s a kind of hurtful talent, just not against people. Hannibal’s figured out how to bridge violence into everything, but you know it’s by choice, and that feels even worse.)*

When he lays down, head against the pillow staring into the ceiling, Will's certain he's not going to sleep. He's been awake so long at this point that it's fallen into the kind of tired that makes you feel like you're walking on roller skates, stumbling around and excusing yourself to no one except the baby who occasionally bleats her resentment over a corner turned too tightly, or a stumbled step on the driveway out to the mailbox. Buster and Winston both jump on the bed to leech warmth from his sides, settling in for their own naps, and Will's hands find their necks to scratch at the coarse and fine hairs alike.

There's the occasional clank and clang of pans from the kitchen, and Chiyoh's low voice speaking Japanese in response to Beatrice's rare protests. (*You stop yourself from getting up to check - nobody's actually upset. Nobody needs you hovering.*) There's what Will thinks is the sound of the oven timer being set, and the sound of the stovetop being turned on to prepare food for either of them. There's the click of dog nails on the hardwood floors, and the sound of walking in slippers, and a few birds on the porch, and before long, the hum of everyday turns into the white noise of being alone, and silent, and at rest.

He dreams, or at least he thinks he does, because he is properly able to sleep, and his mind has time to think of things that aren't just basic functions, and that's new for him.

He doesn't get very far, like he's still awake and only goes just outside the farmhouse doors - just on the steps of the house, where he looks out to the driveway where Hannibal is still kneeling, and to the stoop of the porch where the big black stork is standing, wide eyed and empty mouthed this time. It is rainbow-oily and red-mouthed in the afternoon sun, strutting between the first step and the pea gravel of the walkway beneath, craning its long neck to look in the house like it wants to see in.

Hannibal is the same in the background, chin up, flecked with cuts and bruises, hands on the back of his head. Both are dark-eyed and slow to move their charcoal dark arms. They do not have words, just the clacking of a mouth on either, unable to say anything in the long spaces between them.

Will wants to walk out to meet Hannibal, but he can't. Long feathers are between them, and Will is empty-handed. There's something he's supposed to bring with him, and while he knows that the baby should be it, he thinks that's not the full answer.

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All in all, Will manages to sleep from noon to 4:00 pm, a personal best for the better part of the month so far. The only reason he wakes at all is the sound of the oven timer, chiming for a third time not for the end of the bread proofing, but the end of the bread baking entirely. There's a charming yellow-brown loaf cooling on the kitchen counter when he stumbles cotton-mouthed and cotton-headed into the kitchen.

The baby is fed and currently sleeping, while Chiyoh reads from a well-worn copy of *Emma* in a gentle grip. Will is surprised to see her shaping words as she reads, undisturbed by his quiet approach. She's without sound, but very intent, pulling the story close to her.

The overall effect puts him at ease, like he should crawl back under the covers and take in the sunlight that will rush from the bedspread to the walls of the front room soon enough, racing to disappear into another lost day.

(*Lost doesn't really cut it - it's not lost. You have nowhere to be right now, so what does it matter if you sleep through your old office hours and your travel time? There are no papers to grade. There are no appointments to meet for. Your erstwhile abuser-lover-friend is sitting through a typical recreational period from the four-walls of his cell because he's not safe for the general population, not vice versa. You are admiring his-your family in the spring late afternoon glow and trying to hate yourself for the indulgence, but all you feel is quiet and warm.*)

Will doesn't sleep again, though he does sit and watch the sun work its way downward. At around 5:00 pm, Chiyoh steps outside to the porch, where she sits in one of the flaking wicker chairs, a spot that Will had only a little under two months before drunk himself into a stupor in, and lost a fight with a black stork hours later. When Will checks on the baby, Beatrice sleeps on. He considers waking her, to keep the schedule on its usual clockwork, but the silence is nice, and she deserves the rest after a missed window earlier in the day.

Looking rather like a stork herself with her red silk scarf and sweater, there's a strange mechanical quality to how Chiyoh glides out of the room, glancing at the clock in the kitchen before retrieving her little paperback novel and settling outside with Zoe following happily after. Planned.

It's for this reason that when the cheap black phone rings, and he mechanically picks it up before it can wake the baby, Will is not surprised to hear the now familiar:

"Hello. You are about to receive a call from Hannibal Lecter, an inmate housed at the Chesapeake Detention Facility. Before accepting this collect telephone call, please be advised that-"

Will punches in the ***45** like he has been trained for this moment, skipping ahead. The message clicks to connect, and he frowns at the recording reminder, trying his best to think of a different way to phrase what he wants to say, which is neither professional, nor without suspicion.

*Hey doc, got your instructions from Metcalfe. Went into the office - your pseudo-cousin who shot me was there and has moved in for the full Mary Poppins experience, if Mary Poppins was actually Lady Snowblood, and did I mention she's already shot me once before? I thought you liked me, but I am now not sure?? She told me to take a nap, and I feel like I am in Kindergarten again.*

Well, that's what he is thinking anyway, but obviously too much detail. Something shorter, to the point:

*Salutations, asshole. Your cousin makes me uncomfortable, even if I did get to sleep for a solid four hours uninterrupted. Can you tell her to get out of my house for a few hours or at least eat the store-bought bread? She doesn't listen to me, and I am uncomfortable with her culinary acumen, connection with you notwithstanding.*

Will runs out of time to decide - the static of the other line is buzzing in his ear, and there's a meaningful pause that Will decides he is going to fill promptly, because it's really absurd that in a max detention facility, Hannibal is still finding ways to make his day harder by magical and familial means alike, and he's definitely going to say something about it. He can't help himself when the first thing out of his mouth is "Hello, Doctor Lecter...Her? Really?"

All things considered, it's not a bad summary of events, if a little ungracious given her assistance today and in the days prior. She *did* move his drinking glasses though, and send him to bed like a restless child.

Will feels the edges of one of Hannibal's slow growing smiles, even if he can't see it.

"I like to keep things in the family," comes the sly reply. "She's familiar with the assets that the firm has reference to, and an honest interest in helping, despite your...reservations about her behavior. I have every confidence she'll ensure that everything is addressed fairly from here on out."

It's kind of ridiculous how smooth he is on the fly, ever the consummate liar, but Will also reasons that Hannibal knew he'd be unhappy about this development, and has been thinking about how to delicately bullshit for the recording for a few hours now.

Translation - tough shit, she's here to stay because I said so. Well, Will's got news for him - Beatrice is now the one with all the financial dick swinging clout, and Will's the only one that can talk between the two of them, which means he's been imparted the wealth club by default.

"Oh goodness," Will says, leaning against the kitchen counter, "I guess as long as *she's* satisfied with the arrangement, we can all rest easy."

"Yes, we *can*," Hannibal says, more pointed than Will really wants to address. "Have you gotten an opportunity to rest from your tasks?"

(*You have. You did. Does he want to be thanked for his gift? His foresight? He didn't even have to be a part of this, and you're already getting chastised for not liking how he's setting the new terms of the agreement. Does his money cow you? Aren't you the one that's* ***not*** *in prison for cannibalism and butchering the irritating members of the middle and upper middle class?*)

"The extra…" Will has to think about this, as not to get too into the meat of it, "assistance has been helpful, yes. I was handling the tasks perfectly fine by myself, on my own conditions before. I can't say I wouldn't still prefer it that way, but I see the practicality of your recommended changes."

“Cheer up, dear heart,” Hannibal says happily. “Trials come and go, as we both know. I have an upcoming one of some import to attend that gives me a frame of reference. This one just happens to be yours, though I look forward to the possibility of your attendance at mine.”

Will looks down at the bassinet, where the baby is waking slowly, blinking lazily. There’s a shard of light crossing into the window of the kitchen, raising the sink tap and the scattered contents that Chiyoh hasn’t found a new home for out of compulsive need to create order in Will’s chaos into orange and red.

“I guess that’s coming up,” says Will, stone in his mouth where his tongue should be. Conversation is normally so easy, but the same way Hannibal’s last supper filled him with dread, so too does this. “I’m sure you’ll handle it like you handle everything else that you do.” Before she can start giving him the starter fake cries before the earnest ones, Will swings Beatrice up, loosening her swaddle enough to get a little arm out and into his hand. She opens her eyes and closes them to yawn, unseen across the telephone between them.

“I think this will be the last time we’ll be in contact this way,” Hannibal adds a bit wistfully. “Meeting in the flesh is a better way to conduct business, and I’ve heard some implications as of late that would leave the firm *quite* unhappy if they were to come to light.” There’s a pause - calculating words, trying to weigh what’s important but secret. “Shall I say goodnight before I go?”

(*Can I say goodbye, before everything is finalized and I am less a person to you than I am an omen of your destruction? You feel this between words, considering the next time you see each other it will be with spectators and commentary. Can I be a person you thought of fondly for a minute? There’s so much ugliness to be uncovered in the coming weeks, and even you don’t know how you’ll feel having those coals spread out to cool, still hot and searing red between them.*)

(*Yes, yes, you can afford that. A different last supper, even if you don’t understand why this can’t continue to be a line between you.*)

“We’re both here,” Will says, phone crooked between his neck and the baby pulled up near his face. She hasn’t quite got the hang of how to use her arms yet, but her little fingers curl in his sparse starts of beard hair and the collar of his t-shirt, the sound of her probably no more notable than a slight *hah-hah* of breath between swallows and eyes seeking familiar blurry sights.

Hannibal seems at a loss to that, uncharacteristically silent. Maybe listening.

"Then good night," he says when the silence passes too long, strained, quiet enough to signal that the call is over again, and no one can actually say what they want.

(*To the truth, and all its consequences, you think, lamb underneath your tongue with dark Rioja beneath that.*)

"Then good night," says Will, and he wonders if that will be the only time the two of them can hear Hannibal at the same time, talking to them, not at them from behind a TV screen, a camera lens, the distance of safe anonymity.

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Hannibal's trial is scheduled to hear opening statements on May 6th.

Will is very pleased to not have a TV or a newspaper subscription - he's not sure he would be able to stomach the constant onslaught about it. A quick Google search shows this to be a Wednesday, with an abundance of digital news articles talking about it without adding anything of interest to the conversation. Doctor So-and-So of Nobody Cares University has lots of postulations about the fitness of Hannibal Lecter to stand trial. Reverend Yells Often and Listens Much Less is confident that the defendant will soon be in Hell.

Will cheekily notes amongst the articles in an unrelated publication that May 6th is also National No Diet Day, which he sincerely hopes was intentional.

There's no more calls to be had between Hannibal and him, and this makes the days leading up to the trial crawl. He didn't realize how much weight they added to his week, even if there had only ever been three. (*Made more precious by scarcity, made more dangerous by observance.*) Monday and Friday evenings can't promise any more than the routine that rolls onward without regard for unresolved trauma, or what Will can recognize with great annoyance to be pining. Beatrice doesn't care other than the way Will's mood affects their

time together, and it is this more than anything that makes him bottle up the frustration to hide somewhere where she and Chiyoh can't see it.

Will doesn't really understand it at first, as though this is an arbitrary line in the sand between them. "Oh I can't possibly talk with you, or you'll ruin my arguments like you ruin perfectly reasonable Italian vacation plans and capture-bonding family planning," says a not-Hannibal in his head.

Implications, he had said. Meeting in the flesh being better. Will can't really disagree with that last bit, but he really wishes he wouldn't have to be firm-mouthed and without emotion when it happens.

He really just wants to cross the bench and sit next to Hannibal in the defendant's table. They don't have to say anything. If it makes everything better for the just and good people around them, he's willing to keep that firm-mouthed silence, as long as he can sidle up close, as one taking in a museum does, or looking at similar stars.

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Hannibal's comment about "implications" that would make Metcalfe and his team unhappy eventually reveals itself in a seedy online article that ends up gaining traction through quotes and crosslinking bright and early on Thursday morning following his last call with Hannibal. To everyone's surprise, it has nothing to do with Freddie, who is no doubt stewing at the lost opportunity. Will, not in the habit of setting up alerts for things like this, learns of its existence when Bryan Metcalfe gives him a call at 8:00 am on the dot, surely fresh into his office on the little black phone.

His heart leaps a little at the black phone's vibrating against the counter, where it has sat charging and ready, but Will knows better - Hannibal won't undermine himself so quickly. So when he hears the attorney's voice over the scratchy static, Will does his best to think *yes, this is exactly what I should expect, this is exactly what it should be, you know better, you know better.*

"Mr. Graham," he starts. "I certainly don't blame you, as you are at best following my own instructions on a good day, and answering a call from a madman on a bad one, but I'm going to insist you destroy the SIM card in this phone and not use it any further."

Will, heating water on the stove to bring a bottle up to temperature while Chiyoh strolls the front yard with Beatrice grasping at the fine hairs on her neck *(judging by the occasional, gentle reprimand you hear, or what you assume is one - she speaks almost exclusively in her native tongue when alone with the baby*), just puzzles over the glow of the stove burner, not sure what he's done wrong today.

"Huh?" Will says smartly.

"Improvisation is hard, I get it," Metcalfe continues, sailing past the comment. "I don't pretend to understand the mess between the two of you, and I can tell you, I've heard *a lot* of it, but your chats haven't gone unnoticed by the penitentiary's phone recording oversight. Please put the phone in the sink garbage disposal, and turn it on. Run it until it sounds like it's broken into a million pieces, and then buy a new garbage disposal with your daughter's vast fortune. I'll have a courier bring anything else of note to you directly, early New England style."

Will watches the water slightly simmer. "I've missed something."

"Goddamn right you have," says Metcalfe. "See you in a couple weeks for your court testimony, God willing that no one finds something more damning and you're not ejected on the principle of the matter. I need to go yell as deferentially as I can at the other culprit."

And he hangs up.

Will, perfectly calm, burns himself testing the formula on his forearm, and boots up his laptop with the kind of urgency typically reserved for hurricanes and active gunfire situations. He doesn't have to dig very far, much like the first time - Hannibal is every news station's favorite topic, and while the big names hesitate to drop gossip articles as readily, all the seedier sites are happy to tell Will all about the most recent development:

***Lecter Using Calls to Discreetly Contact Paralegal with Questionable Intent***

*Adrian Halwell, Baltimore Correspondent*

***Big cases mean big scrutiny and big secrets, and there's a lot to suggest that everybody's cannibal of the month, Hannibal Lecter, has been trying to contact a member of his lawyer's law firm in calls unrelated to his case.***

***Now, before the Rabble puts its foot in its mouth and Metcalfe and Associates come at us with the fury of a thousand lawsuits, a disclaimer: they do a lot of business outside criminal defense, and likely have been connected to Lecter prior to the case. We don't suspect the firm itself of foul play. However, leaks from within the Chesapeake Detention Center suggest outside calls being made that aren't pertinent to his upcoming circus of a trial, and if they actually are, they take a distinctly more...shall we say domestic tone?***

*(Link to Transcripts - Audio Redacted)*

***Phrases like "my dear" and "dear heart" aren't really* that *intimately European are they? Spiteful conversations about wishing sedatives on people really isn't either, Mr. Mystery Call Taker. Give your guy Hannibal a break - nobody's more hated in America this week, though it couldn't have happened to a nicer person.***

***What we would recommend, Mr. Metcalfe if you're out there, is to fire whoever's on the other end of the phone. Can't trust the cops to keep your clients safe, but you can trust them to talk about them. We look forward to covering the upcoming case, and will keep our ears to the ground for the "bird thing" guy.***

It's a tattle blog of it's own, the *DC Rabble* - not something that really comes in his orbit, more oriented to scandal than murder and mayhem. Something housewives of the powerful read to amuse themselves, and underpaid interns and Senate staff trying to always get the drop on someone. That they have a Baltimore correspondent is a wonder unto itself.

Will goes white while reading it. It's embarrassing in a way that he can't adequately describe - there's never been a real record of his and Hannibal's conversations, and even if he knows it's not been connected to him, Will can read himself in every line of the transcript, an animal in a corner that is afraid and hopeful in equal measure.

That it is here and not in TattleCrime tells Will the leak is from the prison, probably someone looking for some quick cash. Even Freddie Lounds would have a bit of a time getting access to a high-security penitentiary's phone recordings - she's always been more of a person to person manipulator, and Freddie really doesn't pay for much of anything, frugal to the last. Will hopes the Chesapeake Detention Center isn't sloppy enough to let her in anyway. Hannibal would probably already be dead if it was that easy, though maybe he's like a bloodhound and he just senses trouble before it can find him first.

(*You were the bloodhound that last time before he left, not surrendered. He rewarded you by smacking your nose and getting a new, fancier dog. That still bothers you, desperately wished for daughter or not. You didn't deserve that knife, even if you forgive him it.*)

The guards must have teased him - Will has no doubt Hannibal knows their names.

A couple things he's certain of: Hannibal is right, and what a bitter phrase *that* is. They can't keep talking the way they have now that their business is settled with the trusts, and the world has fixed its gaze on its hungriest son. (*You are no longer special in this regard - everyone sees him, even if they don't really.)* They have Beatrice to consider - their foolishness has actual consequences other than maiming and sending each other to prison in turns. Metcalfe is going to be screaming mad about the implications against his team for weeks.

The other thing he is certain of is that he himself is a spiteful shit that can't stop talking about delicate, unprofessional things even when he's being recorded, and Hannibal is a stupid one, no doubt watching on with mischievous eyes like he can't wait to hear the rest.

(*There could be a thousand people watching and you'd still sink your teeth into flesh, and kiss the broken skin afterwards, not quite sorry, but happy that it's there. Hannibal is the same. Neither of you knows how to sheathe your chewing mouth behind your lips. They are too busy talking in circles, brandishing incisors, molars, and tongue with each parry. You are mountains breaking each other down.*)

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A week before the 6th, Anita calls to let him know his speaking day will be on the following week on the 12th, after the initial opening statements and testimony of Jack Crawford. He should expect the prosecution and defense to take the whole week with him, and for

everything to be pretty miserable around the courthouse - turns out anyone with a camera has been queuing up to test photo shots from different areas surrounding the entrance. He's not the first to go, but he's certainly the first-hand witness to most of the events that transpired and transpired to, and nobody is missing their opportunity to catch his frowning mug in film.

Anita plows forward. She's ordering sandwiches in advance. Does he want coke again? Does he need help finding a babysitter? Does he need some dry cleaning done so he'll be ready for his testimony dates? Should they help him find a different entrance if he's feeling uncomfortable coming through the main one? The Mrs. Verger-Blooms would be happy to help with that, with all of that.

(*Pull the leash a little more, you think, sucking at your teeth.*)

It's agreed that Beatrice shouldn't come to the courthouse - there's nothing about that Will can say is safe or sane. She's inevitably going to get frustrated being unable to sit with Will, and Will's inevitably going to have his own meltdown if she's out of sight but still present. Everybody ate up Freddie's article about the baby, judging from the comment count on her own general coverage of Beatrice, and he'd really rather just avoid it entirely if he can. Margot was able to put the dots together, and there's far more clever minds out there that would love to take their own swing at it.

(*Imagine Jack, or Kade Purnell, or worse still, someone like Bedelia who doesn't seem to have any strong allegiance to Hannibal after all. She plays the field, and she's never really played it to your strengths.*)

Try not to be the "bird thing" guy is his mission. It's important that he's not. No more stork statements if he can. No more air mail jokes.

It's always a nagging thought - showing up in Baltimore, baby carrier in hand, both he and Beatrice in their nicest outfits that fit correctly. They wouldn't actually match, as for him that's an unattractive brown tweed suit, and for her a sparkling blue tulle monstrosity meant more for Hannibal's benefit than his, but the same way the stray dogs always have suited him in their mismatch, he hopes the baby does too. *"Oh here comes Will Graham with his little girl,"* the jurors would say, seeing him for the first time. *"Look how competent he is, despite his sordid and tragic history that we're going to have dragged all across the courtroom floor. Are those kittens on the baby's socks? Precious!"*

It's not that he wants to show her off to everyone, because fuck those people. Those people were content to throw him in a cage and tell him to pound sand, when he was scrambled like an egg and told he was something that he wasn't. They don't deserve his attention or ire, and they don't deserve to know what he's up to. He could have a dozen bird babies, and it would still not be their business. Graham Stork Farms, he'd name it. A cure for what ails you, whether you're lonely, conflicted about what you love, or experiencing entirely too much restful sleep and need to forget what that's like.

Despite the egg scrambling and the mislabeling, and Jesus Christ, is that ever something to choose to overlook, he wants to put a face to Hannibal's idea of his dainty, soft-haired Beatrice. He's only ever heard her quiet noises. He's never seen a tiny toe, or her little slanted eyelashes at the corners of her eyes, or how her cheek dimples when she frowns or she smiles.

(*And they are becoming real now, not reflexive - she smiles at your fingers tickling her sides, at the dogs sniffing at her face, at a loudly exclaimed "Good morning!" because if you say it loud enough, it comes true with the lift of her mouth.*)

May 6th eventually passes, and Will makes it a point to not listen to coverage of the opening statements. His normal phone, forgotten in its irrelevance, just rings all the time all day, no doubt full of people jockeying for his opinion on a thing he hasn't seen. He doesn't want to hear how close to the truth any of it gets - about Hannibal, or himself, or how sordid and dark the whole thing is, and if Cordell's blood in his mouth tasted good, or if Hannibal's tongue in it instead a day later was better.

He gets the tweed suit pressed, shines his shoes, and re-shaves his face which has been gaining thorny strength with the return of the scraggly beard. He tells Anita he'd really appreciate it if he could just drink water and maybe bring a granola bar because it would be a bad look to throw up in front of everybody, and maybe he'll meet her at the courthouse so she doesn't find out about the benevolently meddlesome family currently reorganizing his home, or get any closer to finding out the Paralegal with Questionable Intent is just a sad man that needed a few phone calls as a reminder of what he's fighting for.

"Everything's peachy keen," he says, throwing the black phone into a full sink of water with the power switched on. Chiyoh nods at this, and slices off a buttery piece of bread to eat between attempts to burp the baby, and Will dismantles the little dead cell phone piece by piece.

# the gift of failure

Chapter Notes

Rumors of this story's death have been greatly exaggerated. Enjoy!

Will finds as the hours pass that much of his testimony day will be a series of checklists. Not particularly well constructed ones - lecturer or not, he's always been the type to jot down a note on any available paper surface, accustomed to forgetting as he finds new things to focus on in the rush of experiences that happen from waking to sleep. What he makes are the spontaneous kind that are confined to his head, that keep him on task, and away from meandering how he's gotten to this point in his life. Falling in with the past couple of years, this point doesn't connect well with the others. It has sharp edges, and high falls.

In the spirit of everything being terrible, Will's presumably first day of testimony begins at 4:00 am. Not the actual testimony, mind you, just the day, but it does rather set the tone.

Beatrice wakes with the colicky screams that only infants are capable of, edging the border of mind-rattling. This resonance, as documented by Will, causes the parent's brain to shake, like it has been sat next to a very small but insistent speaker with the treble settings all jacked up. As far as insistent speakers go, Beatrice is a reliable piece of equipment normally, but she has a talent for feeding into Will's energy, and this compromises her otherwise sunny disposition.

Will's energy, much like his first day of testimony, is terrible.

Chiyoh, who assumes this of Will regardless of the truth, comes down the stairs looking as flawless as ever, and makes coffee. This only makes Will sigh louder, rocking back and forth, rubbing the tiny back on his shoulder. He gets a half-hearted wail in reply. "You're in for it, today," he says as she moves through the kitchen.

“So are you,” she replies, and Will does his best impression of a man who is avoiding the reality of swallowing a frog in his mouth. Lips tight, tongue lax, and eyes squinted. Beatrice gives another hearty cry, dissatisfied with the reception of the one seconds before, and does her best unintentional impression.

Will thinks not for the first time that he wishes he could make this all better. Something quick. Maybe order some of those orange batons they use at the airport and wave down another bird that is lucky since he seems to have become a target for them. Preferably not another stork.

(*The idea of two babies crying in stereo is soul-crushing. Absolutely imagined ovary withering. As far as you’re concerned, your non-existent tubes are metaphorically tied for life after having the one by the grace of avian fauna. Which really begs the question: do birds respect birth control? Do* ***you*** *have to be the one to take it if they do?* )

The clock strikes 6:00 am, and Will’s actual alarm goes off. The first of his checklists, preparing for testimony day, comes into play all by rigorous design, if only tepid execution.

At 6:10, Will takes his mug of coffee and drinks it fast enough to burn his tongue, in hopes of having a second one before showering. He showers in frigid water, because old farm houses aren’t notorious for their superior water heaters and he doesn’t want to leave Chiyoh alone with a fussy kid any more than necessary before dressing. While dressing, he eats a granola bar filled with cheap chocolate chips because that is what he has time for between attempting to get his shirt collar to sit flat and shaking a bottle full of formula to try and get the heat evenly distributed.

(*Nobody, especially Hannibal and Hannibal’s baby, enjoys poorly cooked food, liquid or otherwise, and she decries even the tiniest flaw in its warmth. You are a custodian of this particular experience, and your child isn’t going to grow up to eat people out of a misplaced sense of righteousness from being forced to eat something. Obviously you aren’t feeding her siblings, or making her swear loyalty to the Communist Movement, which is a* ***very large*** *thematic change, but one can never be too careful.*)

After that, there’s really not a lot of room for lollygagging, even acting on the assumption Will has lollygagged a single day in his life.

Critical moral decisions being excluded, of course.

Face shaved? Check - roughly. No blood spots, so a wild success. Baby fed? Check - she vomits once, screams, and promptly falls asleep afterward. This kind of behavior tracks perfectly with Hannibal's general reaction to things that displease him when he has no time to plot something more dire. Will has no doubt the next eight to twelve hours will reign in peace as soon as he leaves, much like the almost year he spends recovering from a gut injury. Dogs fed? Yes, bless their quiet hearts, even if he does have to use the lint roller three times. Chiyoh annoyed? Check - Will writes a series of additional instructions to go with the ones made yesterday, including exacting placement of where to put things within the chest, because fine detail is important in scholarly writing, and Beatrice Graham is nothing if not a scholarly effort for a man with no prior experience with kids.

She looks at him once more like an idiot when she reads this, but asks for no clarification. She'll figure it out, they both suppose.

Will looks at the time on the microwave - 6:51. Nine minutes to keep it together, an hour to drive to the Federal District Court in Baltimore and have some kind of discreet meltdown in commuter traffic that (*hopefully*) doesn't end in violence, and an additional thirty minutes to try not to say anything incriminating on film before literally everything he says is incriminating. Perfect. Sounds reasonable.

Sounds like not enough time.

He sighs.

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Will is eight years old the first time he is told that it's inappropriate to cry in public. Everything has been forgiven by some random margin up to this point, like there's a genetic timer that begins from birth, and at Day 2,928 it becomes reprehensible to have a good, satisfying breakdown, and alerts everyone in the general area that you are a big baby. Tears are now made of satanic minerals, or one would think by the disgust they generate. Sobs are met with the disdain of Roman foot soldiers shoving people into the Coliseum. Wipe your

nose, man up. Save it for funerals and breakups, and don't leave the faucet on too long, or it's back to being inappropriate again.

Will learns to save it for home, and late nights, and showers where you can't even be sure you were crying to begin with. (*Plausible deniability!*) Never in the presence of others. There's once or twice he suspects his own father of similar weaknesses, and again in Jack Crawford's office when the older agent learns of his wife's illness, but he really doesn't have the courage to ask. It's hard to hold the illusion together in the face of scrutiny. He doesn't wish that responsibility on anyone, much less himself, even for his curiosity or validation.

He bends the unspoken rules of crying as an adult a few times - frequently during his bouts with encephalitis. He is overwhelmed, and certain he is sick, and so afraid by himself out at his house where he can't even be sure he won't harm himself. He is not always convinced he is physically sick during this period, but the other kind instead. Surely this is allowed. Surely this is the situation where grown people are allowed to be weak.

Hannibal, despite knowing he is well beyond 2,928 days old, allows this with grace. He offers handkerchiefs. He gently pokes the hurt Will needs to give voice to, and comforts it in others, like he's satisfied to have gotten a reaction.

(*You've wondered a few times if that's not part of the appeal of psychiatry - watching people squirm at their own iniquity. Not just Hannibal, but the whole field.*)

He's still a bastard of course, because he could have stopped it at any point, and these are all signs of an extreme sociopath, but the Will of those moments in time is grateful for them, even when he's faking it later in prison. He can cry in front of Hannibal. He can cry about Hannibal. There's too much emotion to not allow it to dissolve his eyes into salt and water and whatever catharsis the body is seeking when it demands it.

( *Were you though? Faking it that time in prison? Weren't the tears real, a reflection of the anger you felt, the humiliation to be put in a small crate like you're a dog that's being housebroken for the first time, and can't be allowed to sleep in the open?* )

He cries more with Beatrice around. Will's in good company, because much like him, Beatrice is incapable of expressing wants and desires without it. Unlike him, Beatrice is also incapable of speech, and Will wrestles with that feeling of iniquity again. He's tired, he feels

overwhelmed, and even in the presence of Chiyoh and her seemingly innate talents, Will feels like a poor choice for this job. It's ok to cry in this context - the baby will not remember in a few years, if at all. She's going to keep up the habit herself for a minimum of 2,928 days, assuming anyone ever dares to tell her she needs to stop.

Will wants to cry more for other things, but it's hard to find the time between anxiety and the driving needs of existence on either side of it. He wants to cry in consideration of the trial, and his role in it, and why he's even upset. In consideration of Abigail Hobbs, who at the end of the day, was a stupid teenager with a young person's desire to live above all else. In consideration of how deep the good Doctor Lecter got his hooks into him, and then had the temerity to be upset when Will lashed out in turn. Hannibal harmed him in more ways than anyone ever has, materially and mentally. If he hadn't grounded himself in the concept of who Will Graham is in the years before meeting him, Will would be a shell of a person.

(*He also gave you something lovely. It doesn't fix everything, but you hold that gift the way you imagine Mary of Nazareth holds Christ, all blasphemy aside. You forgive because of this, the same as she does. You hate how it cools your temper and resolve into something that can be shaped once more.*)

(*Does steel love the smith? Does grain await transformation by the scythe? Does it know it can be something greater than its base elements, or does it feel perversion with each strike of the tools?*)

Will commends himself for only hyperventilating briefly between Bethesda and Hillandale. He cries between Hillandale and Laurel, which is practically nothing but a mall and a few exits. Once he gets beyond Laurel, he can take the time to wipe his face with the spare baby wipes he's been keeping in the backseat to keep his suit clean. If he turns up the AC, his face will clear in time to park.

One would hate for anyone to know that he's anything other than a weird person, much less someone that time and again needs emotional support, and finds empty kitchens to die in every time he looks for it.

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The trouble with courthouses is that they typically only have one or two security access points, and only one of them is actually equipped to do anything of substance, like the second one was there as a talking point for a community budget. As a person well acquainted with budgets, and how departments choose to spend them, Will literally cannot fathom how only the main entrance in one of the foremost federal courthouses on the East Coast is only receiving people through one corridor. Sure, there's a lot of people waving their ***Cannibals Go To Hell, Repent*** signs, and their very cute ***Hannibal Lecter Can Eat Me Any Day*** posters, and there's probably good reason to suspect at least one person in the mob on the steps of the courthouse is a verifiable nutcase that doesn't need more than one entryway to create a situation, but Will is very actually inconvenienced by this is multiple ways.

The press is always a problem for him. He doesn't have a good face for photos, which is to say he doesn't have a good face for photos where he doesn't look like he's considering five ways to sever the jugular while looking at someone. This is not inaccurate, as he is often thinking exactly that academically, but this is also not a great portrayal of character in most media. Freddie has a particular talent for capturing the nuances of this. Will is wholly unsurprised to walk from the parking garage five blocks away and find her only two blocks into the walk, seeking such opportunities.

"Did you put some kind of bell on my car?" he asks, striding quickly down the sidewalk, Freddie furiously taking photos while trying to keep pace. *Man walks quickly towards impending doom*, the caption will read when she posts one of several. "I mean, I'm sure you could hear Satan fart and find a way to spin a 600 word article on the scandalous nature of that, but I didn't really think my parking choice was going to be a factor today."

"Easy to guess where you'd go. Didn't want your car vandalized, but too cheap to get a cab from your house," Freddie says easily. "Besides, I like getting all the photos of you before you get to the courthouse - one doesn't want to compete with the New York Times and The Atlantic for photo content."

Will's stomach gives a little turn at that. "Think they'll be interested in that?" he asks, a little light-headed.

"Oh Will," Freddie says with a smile, dropping her camera back down to her chest. "They've been here from Day One, even if you haven't, and they are absolutely *dying* to meet you."

But she does frown, after a moment.

“No baby today? Seems negligent of you. People will forget you’re a sympathetic figure with no props.”

“Babysitters are a thing,” Will replies gruffly. “What would you do if I got dismissed for causing a disturbance mid-testimory for a diaper change?”

Freddie doesn’t miss a beat. “Call you an irresponsible hack who shouldn’t have a baby, which I thought would be obvious, but here you are, with what looks to be spit-up on your collar anyway.”

Will looks down, pulling the suit to look at it. She’s not technically wrong, but she also might not be technically right - if the last couple of weeks have taught him anything, it’s that he could be covered in any kind of bodily fluid at any time.

“I haven’t dug up anything that suggests that you technically *can’t,* ” Freddie adds, as though this is puzzling.

Will nods at this, scratching at the stain. “Loins in good condition, as you'd well know by your generous sensor box. No conservator to my estate. Paperwork in order and filed with the correct authorities. I’d know, I checked all of them to make sure it wasn’t a mistake. Consider me open for baby business.”

Freddie groans at this image - fair enough, but Will takes it for one of the few victories he can expect today. When they round the corner to Lombard Street, and the long line of trees leading to the entrance and around the brightly colored metal sculptures, he feels relatively confident this is true. The sound of cameras is the hissing of cicadas, and the outcry of reporters is cacophonous. The signs are child’s play - the people crowding his space are the actual struggle.

“Will Graham! Hey Will!”

“Mr. Graham!”

“Special Agent Graham!”

It’s overwhelming. They all want him to look at them - he doesn’t know if they even expect him to say anything. Will’s avoided all the coverage of the courthouse after being pseudo-outed in the prison calls, but maybe this has been a mistake. Know thy enemy, and while he operates on the running assumption that everyone is on some level, he doesn’t know how to gracefully parry this kind of attack.

Anita finds him fortunately, running up in a smart little grey suit, pearls swinging from the black blouse beneath, but only through dodging the shoulders of photographers, reporters, news anchors, and mysterious others. Is there even a press line? Is there security? Is she trying to tell him something? Will shakes his head, and feels her pull. He does his best to hunch forward, keep his glasses up and his head down, and work his way down the path under her strong grip.

“Special Agent Graham, as a person with experience as a victim and an investigator, do you have any words for the public as you go in to testify today?”

(*No. Fuck off, maybe.*)

“Mr. Graham, as a new father, would you feel safer if Hannibal Lecter receives the death penalty?”

(*No, and not just because Hannibal Lecter is a new father too. You’d feel safe if everyone could stop reminding you that there’s existential risks to you and your baby, lest you start advocating for the death penalty for every person that’s ever made you feel unsafe, i.e. this entire crowd. Just have everyone line up, single file, and you’ll grab the nearest chainsaw and take care of the problem like an ungroomed hedge.*)

“Hey Will, Will! You haven’t been here for most of the proceedings! Do you think you’ll watch Lecter’s testimony after yours?”

(*No. Yes. No comment. You can't stand the idea of watching him for several days. You can't imagine that while you're watching him that you'd keep the softness out of your face. You can't imagine you could listen to him talk about the things he did to you, in that unbothered tone and timbre that you've never managed to do successfully yourself. "A simple matter of combining sodium amytal and prednisone in low doses to keep him functional," he would say, and you'd be between wishing him dead, and wishing you can send him pictures of the baby on the phone. "Will is a tenacious boy," he'd say, and you'd agree, and everything inside you would burn.*)

"Agent Graham, do you agree with the statements made by Doctor Bloom and Doctor Chilton earlier this week--"

(*No, you don't know what they said.*)

Will frowns at this, Anita still pulling him along. He looks back long enough to catch a quick glimpse - round face, square glasses, a younger pleasant looking man who's used to smiling. He has very serious eyes that find Will's face too, casting from corner to corner like he's searching for something there. Recognition maybe.

(*You probably should. Know him. And what they said.*)

He doesn't get to talk about it more, or ask who wants to know - the entry to the courthouse is here, and the police are pushing back the crowd, and the doors are something like safety Jumping from fire to frying pan, he guesses, and watches the man disappear into the quiet of the front hall and the metal detectors, and the peculiar smell that all old government buildings and airports have. The conveyor belts for the bag check hum, and people pretend to not look at him.

"I'll catch you up," Anita promises. "At the recess around lunch. Nothing worth stressing about, just the other witnesses leaving you opportunities to not merit your own charges."

Which sounds great, but also not like the whole story.

Will empties his pockets. He toes off his shoes. He hands his driver's licence to the guard at the entrance, and feels less naked with a middle-aged man looking him in the face to confirm that yes, he's *that* Will Graham than he did not knowing what other people have been saying after so long of not wanting to know.

He's supposed to be the guy that knows all the details, but he doesn't know *this* one.

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Will is either a masochist or a coward, and voluntarily sequesters himself until they're ready for him. The idea of having to watch Hannibal get walked in by men that he could likely kill with the cuffs alone is rather like watching a lion in chains. He doesn't want to hear the court get called to order, or who's presiding, or an evaluation of the minutes, or watch the jurors shuffle in.

(*You need to not know their faces - you need to make sure you don't recognize if one is parked next to you, lest you do something with that information. You're not a good man, even if you're a father.* ***Especially*** *because you're a father, and you have a stake in Hannibal's life through unasked for stork offspring. Imagine that; rendered criminally associated via bird law, which apparently exists.*)

He is also perhaps a dramatic bitch, standing in a neighboring hallway while press, law enforcement, other witnesses, and public attendees with standing make their way into the primary courtroom - something grand, with wooden doors, brass handles, and additional security like this is a SWAT operation instead of Hannibal having a big, man eating giggle at the entire population of the Tri-State area as some sort of obscure, self-flagellating come-on by getting himself arrested deliberately. (*So really, you deserve each other.*) Entering the courtroom at the last minute means an inescapably visible entrance, every eye on him, but it also means no one will try to *talk* to him. It's not like he wasn't going to be the biggest freak in the ring today, anyway. He'll take his chances with not having to *explain that* to people.

So when Anita comes out, and tells him it's time, Will contemplates just going full Timon of Athens: invite all the people in the courtroom to hang themselves, run away, and die in the woods somewhere as a misanthrope.

Dramatic. Free of the cares of men. Hannibal would appreciate it from an academic perspective, and then call it derivative, to which Will says twice now that Hannibal can hang himself.

Instead he opens the door, contemplates the ugly runner carpet's peculiar shade of speckled grey that does nothing for the space's appearance as well as how bright his shoes look on it, and resolutely keeps his eyes on the United States seal above the judge. It's always been kind of peculiar that the court system plays at majesty under the glow of ugly fluorescent lights, but Will's not the contractor, so he supposes it's none of his business.

Maybe this is what getting married feels like, coming down the row to the groom. He favors the baby vomit again with a scratching finger. It's still there.

(*You guess it's a shotgun wedding, if **you** have to be the bride. That tracks with the paperwork, mommy dearest.*)

He passes the barrier with the bailiff giving him a strange look. He approaches the bench and the witness box. He doesn't his absolute damndest to wait  until the very last second to face the audience, and the prosecution, and the defense. He puts his hand to the Bible as the bailiff requests, something cheap, comparable to one of those ones in the drawer of every motel he's ever shacked up in as a kid between houses or trailer parks.

Will looks, because he's a fan of fires he can burn himself with, and while the Bible doesn't really merit this kind of description, the flash of burgundy red in the corner of his vision does. Speaking of fires.

In a line of svelte lawyers and assistants, Hannibal stands out, a little less gelled, but a lot more straight shouldered and proper in his posture than usual. He is dressed like this is all a very fine night out - red silk suit, black lapels, black shirt and tie. The only thing that he's missing is something obnoxious to stick in the breast pocket, or a flower for his lapel. His face is inscrutably neutral, the way he was in visits to the mental hospital, or digesting statements made in their therapy appointments, but Will still has the sense of an underlying amusement there.

He's worn this for Will, whether to draw eyes away from Will, or Will's to him, but his venous-colored obnoxiousness cannot go unnoted. A beating red heart, still in the chest,

always in the corner of his right eye.

What an asshole.

Will's missed him like he's *actually* his right eye, not just a bright sore at it's edge.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, under penalty and pain of perjury, so help you God?" comes the inevitable question.

(*Have you ever? Told the truth like that? Certainly for others, but for yourself? Do you even know the truth of yourself, really? Hannibal thinks he does. 12 jurors think they will by the end of this, like one or two days is enough, when even Hannibal didn't have the full measure of you in a year and a half. But do you?*)

"I do," he says, and looks instead to Adrian Warren, prosecutor, this morning's taskmaster. The man takes the floor, already at it for several days, and at it for several days more.

But the prosecutor doesn't begin at Will's side. He strolls a little before the podium, hands in his pockets, before turning to the jury, the prosecution and the defense, and the audience beyond, unhesitant where Will was. He folds his hands behind him and speaks at them:

"Special Agent Will Graham - previous police officer, retired with distinction from the New Orleans Police Department, with one of the highest close rates of any detective. A frequently cited scholar of forensic evidence and entomology, having written several scientific papers and lectured at length. Criminal profiling professor for the FBI Academy, granted the title of Special Agent for his efficacy, both in time and accuracy."

Well at least he's not starting with Will's history of...failure? Giving only half his attention to anything at any given time? It feels nice to be built up a little, even if it's because you're an occasional material witness to your Baby Daddy's trial, though Will guesses no one understands to what extent. He almost blurts "father of seven dogs, and one daughter", because that feels like an important title too. "Capable sous chef when working with fish, or traditional Italian recipes that substitute people for pork" as well, but that is probably only a nice title to Hannibal, so he lets that one drop quickly.

“Special Agent Graham, of all the people that we’ve spoken with since the beginning of this, barring the defendant who will of course have his day,” says the prosecutor, eying Hannibal like his suit offends him, “has perhaps the most experience with identifying serial killers, and more importantly, the most experience seeing just *who* Doctor Hannibal Lecter is.”

Doubtful, Will thinks, but also not wholly untrue. For what it’s worth, even in his stillness at the table, Hannibal looks all the more satisfied, like he could nod at any time, and it would feel like a thousand of a thousand pound flake of granite, breaking free to fall from a cliffside instead of the small emotional concession it really is.

(*But this is what you get. You said you didn’t want to think about him anymore, and this is what you get - tiny sips of something you know is deeper and darker than this.*)

“Special Agent Graham,” continues Warren, at last turning to Will, looking very tidy in his navy blue suit - very prosecutorial, very confident. He’s had a lifetime of work leading to this, the trial that will make his career. He should send Hannibal a fruit basket as a thank you. He should send one to Will as well for being cooperative if one ignores a week-long stint of refusing to give a deposition. Extenuating circumstances, Will reminds himself, as though Beatrice is the cause, and not that he’s never wanted to give one, and he doesn’t want to be here.

Will blinks. The courtroom persists. Hannibal is glaring red in the corner, hands flat against the defense’s table.

“You were working in Quantico as a lecturer when Agent Jack Crawford, Head of the Behavioral Sciences Unit tapped you to work on the Garret Jacob Hobbs case, also known as the Minnesota Shrike, correct?”

(*Looks like you get to let yourself down. Nothing new on god’s green earth, you guess. Deep breath - here you go.*)

There are familiar faces out there in the crowd - Alana Bloom, Margot Verger, Jack Crawford, Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller, people he supposed he might not see again. So too are there others he doesn’t know - high ranking officials, chiefs of police, families of victims,

press, the hissing of pencil as a court illustrator catches the anxiety in his face. Will lets out a breath through his nose.

"Yes," Will says.

So he lives it again, telling the whole sordid tale once more, and Will must be mindful not to trip on his meanings. He doesn't get to start over three times like the deposition, and at least a few people in the room know why, even if Will pretends to not know the truth of that either.

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The prosecution, as Anita warns him in the weeks before, tries to set him up for a lot of ***gotcha!*** moments, which doesn't really track with his deposition experience, but maybe with actual media representation looking in and writing on today's events, they at least have to pretend that bargaining isn't going on between witnesses, or that the FBI is trying to shut this down as expediently as possible, absolute madmen for agents or not.

There's huge volumes of content to be covered, and it drones on, stenographer's quiet play of fingers as music in the background. Some questions stand out more than others, either stupid or painful or a little of both.

This too reads like a list. Unpleasant memories, recorded chronologically and delivered in powerpoint sized digestible segments for the class. Yes or no questions, as with the reporters, are kind of obnoxious to navigate. From a certain point of view, most things could be answered with either, and Will could write a novel on why. He's supposed to keep things impersonal if he can - nothing for Hannibal's lawyer to use as fuel, and nothing for the prosecution to hear and throw him in doubt, like he has motive to harm and can't be objective. That's pretty much everyone in the room, but Will rolls his eyes and does what's been rehearsed.

"Did you know Hannibal Lecter was feeding information to Jack Crawford during your initial unofficial sessions with him?" No, duh. Will likely would have tried to kill him on principle. The Hannibal of that timeframe would have probably not let him.

“You began visiting him again on your own following your release from the mental hospital that he helped set up your confinement in, correct?” Yes, to look for evidence of his guilt, and thanks for that flattering portrayal, Will thinks sourly. It’s one of those tricky questions that make him look like an idiot, but Will has to admit he’s probably one. From his stony stillness, Hannibal’s eyes are shiny as though set with glass, perhaps proud of Will’s wild idiocy.

“Did you realize Abigail Hobbs was alive?” No. No further comments. Will actually has to look at the ceiling for a moment on that one, thinking of her little pale hand on the kitchen floor. He certainly won’t look at Hannibal. Let them write and speculate about *that* one if they need to. They don’t deserve the truth of the sacrificial lamb supper, or burning documents together, or the moment that Hannibal pieces together that he doesn’t understand Will after all.

“Did you suspect he would stab you?” Yes, only all the goddamn time from prison onwards, and ironically *not* on this particular occasion. Will omits that subtext, and comes out looking like a hero, but his gut aches at the memory of that hateful little knife.

“Did you follow Hannibal Lecter to Italy?” Yes, because he was going to kill more people. Hard to argue with a nice altruistic cause like that, right? Even if Jack, Alana, Margot, Bedelia, and Hannibal know that’s maybe reason 4 on yet another list about 20 bullet points long, which is not in the deposition and therefore of no concern.

“Did you participate in the massacre of the Verger security, Cornell Doemling, or Mason Verger?” No, but only because he was drugged within an inch of his life (*or face, as the circumstances were*), otherwise he would have done a little axe-murdering himself. Subtext omitted again.

Stupid questions. Hours and hours of stupid questions, made stupid by the fact that he can’t possibly explain everything.

He doesn’t shy away from the memories though, which comes as a surprise. It’s only towards the end of the whole godforsaken timeline that Will can look at it from a high place and think: wow, how terrible this all sounds when said out loud. Riding not far behind that though: wow, how interesting it all has been, after the march of mediocre days, disappointments, the grind of people’s petty grievances and working class tragedies against his skull in everyday life and in detective work and profiling. How wonderful and how awful

to be made aware of every square inch of his existence, as excruciating as it was, and a room of hundreds find it fascinating.

(*You think in this you understand Hannibal, how he could watch his kingdom dissolve after meeting you. What disappointments did you replace? What prior enjoyments did you become superior to? What days of the week did the food taste better, even if the company was sweet or sour, by the mere existence of you?*)

“Hannibal Lecter’s arrest by U.S. Marshals and Agent Crawford was completed in the early hours of February 25th, when Lecter surrendered without a fight on your property in Wolf Trap, Will. Do you know why that happened?”

Will’s mouth twists. “Yes,” he replies, because Jack was there, and half a dozen armed men were there, even when the sweat is still drying on Will’s back unseen, and the press of hands is fresh on his thighs, hips, arch of the neck, arch of the heel, anywhere Hannibal could get his hands on, and there’s no reason to not repeat the declaration because while the rest is a secret, this part never was. “He wanted me to know where he was, so I could always find him.”

(*This part hurts to admit, even if the memory doesn’t: because he loves you in whatever way he is capable of, and didn’t want you to put him out of mind, where you could never be capable of loving him. Because you asked him to fix everything, assuming it was impossible, and as Hannibal’s uncanny wish granting often goes, he did, in a fashion. If he had left, you would have never been able to tell him what he left you, and your heart is warmer knowing someone cherishes Beatrice as much as they crave you. You’ll hopefully someday loosen your tongue enough to tell him the same, when the whole sordid tale doesn’t feel so fresh.*)

The last gotcha comes - it’s almost a soft throw, knowing what he does from Metcalfe and Hannibal already, in very careful terms. Maybe this is why he was made to know the strategy, and decide for himself what to do with it. Impersonal, Will reminds himself. Keep it impersonal, even if everything that happened by definition was not.

“Do you, in your opinion as a profiler, after all that deliberation to hurt you and hardship, think that Hannibal Lecter is of sound mind, or do you think he’s insane?”

(*He still hurt you. It’s ok to be hurt, as long as you heal.*)

“I think he thought that all sounded very reasonable,” Will says, huffing a little laugh despite himself. “Do sane people think like that?”

(*Yes. No. What does it say about you, if either is correct?*)

It sounds like a joke out loud, even if Will is dead serious and no one can really tell if he’s answered the question at all. Hannibal’s expression suggests that it is a terribly good joke, painting himself the villain in broad strokes, peaked lapels, and a red devil outfit. He’s a good actor, and always has been. Will just wishes he had been on it sooner, and that it didn’t pain him to feel that way.

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Anita gives him his promised granola bar, the second of today, but also a lunchbox full of little sandwiches to pick from. He’s grateful for her foresight, now that he can hide in the courthouse, unwilling to face the mob again, and unwilling to answer any questions he isn’t legally bound to. “Anything you want, sugar,” she says. “I know you said you’d pass, but you did good. Five  hours straight, and nothing to contradict yourself.”

Will can thank Hannibal for that - he’s gotten rather good at keeping the different threads of the tapestry separate from each other long enough to weave the right pattern. The prosecution had obvious things they were looking for, and Will’s cooperation is important. He has a harder time reading Pat the Bunny for the twentieth time in three days than he does reading Adrian Warren.

The defense team’s questions are the actual point of concern for Will. Metcalfe is careful, diligent in his note taking, and very calm in his presentation, much less snide than Will knows him to be capable of. There is very little interjection during the course of the prosecution’s questions, save for the occasional clarification or expansion on a subject. It’s suspicious.

“Don’t embarrass the mother of my child,” he imagines Hannibal telling them. “He’s very sensitive to embarrassment.”

He has to remind himself over and over again that the goal of the defense is that Hannibal is crazy, and that it's good for everyone involved if he is. Hannibal being crazy is safety, locked away from people who won't understand the threat he is, because there's no breaking in this particular horse. Hannibal being crazy means Alana and Margot can safely repay a debt and mind the minotaur in his maze. Hannibal being crazy means that a lot of people died senseless deaths as consequence to a difficult upbringing paired with a privileged knowledge of medicine and cuisine, which isn't necessarily false, if maybe a little unfair. Hannibal being crazy means Will is a victim of a madman, not complicit, just protecting himself.

Will bites into a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and tries not to think about that.

But Hannibal being crazy means he's not going to the chair or to lethal injection, things he probably deserves, but don't really suit Will's needs when he's truthful with himself. If Hannibal is willing to take on the shame and the controversy of an insanity plea, then it shouldn't hurt Will to reinforce it. God knows Hannibal's attempt to saw his head open didn't come from a place of logic. If he can just apply that to everything in hindsight, he can do this.

At least, if he has as much information as he can. "What is it that Alana and Chilton have been saying?" he says around the gummy jam, stuck to the roof of his mouth. He wonders if Anita hoped he'd forget.

She doesn't flinch. "Nothing worth worrying about," she says again, as she did this morning. "Mostly responding to how culpable you are in Lecter's actions, from an outsider perspective. We *are* trying to avoid you going to your own trial, remember?"

Will nods, tasting the word 'culpability' like it's a cherry pit in the jelly, hiding behind a tooth.

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"Mr. Metcalfe, you have the floor."

Lunch isn't long enough for Will to fully draw his doubts back into himself, but alas, a slick black suit ensemble has taken position and Will must answer. Game time, the actual hard part, the part where someone takes his testimony and works on eviscerating it to make it more favorable to their client. Byron Metcalfe's speciality, when he's not the unexpected bearer of vast wealth windfalls.

Will guesses he's not all bad, even if he does drive the car of a douchebag.

"Mr. Graham," begins Metcalfe, with the same kind of weird casualness that the prosecution starts with. Coming from him, it feels more like a parody, thumbing his nose at the opposing side and their transparent manipulation. "We've given a great deal of attention to your scholarly and professional pursuits today, but not much to the reasons behind their prolificness. Motivation, after all, is a huge component of a crime and the severity of it. There's no doubt the defendant has committed several, but I have some questions on how you came to be entrenched in so many of them, and why."

Will changes his mind. Metcalfe is a bastard.

The judge makes a discontent sound, which Metcalfe nods at - impatience, perhaps at this meandering approach. This isn't a conversational setting, but neither does this sound very different from the detainment room back in his detective days, like Metcalfe is going to hold an iron to him and see what makes him squeal. Is he implying his professional life is rife with tawdy acts of violence or something? Maybe that Will doesn't play well with others?

(*Ignoring the poorly thought out entrapment scheme. Ignoring the desecration of a man's body to make it believable, or vigilante justice you fail to enact across the Atlantic when you made it so believable that Hannibal didn't see it coming.*)

"Would you say your empathy is a major part of your day-to-day interactions?"

Will frowns at this, eyes darting over to Anita, who looks keenly at Metcalfe herself, while the prosecution immediately stands. He hates questions like this. Adrian Warren, shiny toothed and sharp faced, favors Metcalfe with a somewhat hateful glance.

“Your honor, isn’t this more of an opinion than a medically relevant question? Mr. Graham is hardly a psychiatrist himself.”

“The question has been asked of most of the witnesses other than Mr. Graham that have knowledge of his and the defendant’s dealings,” Metcalfe slides in, unruffled by the venom across the room. “Wouldn’t you say it’s fair to ask the man himself?”

“Overruled,” says the judge, firm and grim. Will bounces a foot, unseen beneath the pulpit of the witness box, and avoids looking at Hannibal behind Metcalfe. It’s a strange line of questioning to start with after hours of Will’s recounting of events. “Mr. Graham’s empathy has been a catalyst for much of the events discussed here and in court previously. I would hear his own description of it, and it hardly alters the defendant’s position forensically. Please proceed, Mr. Metcalfe.”

Metcalfe nods, and looks back to Will. “Mr. Graham, same question. Would you say your empathy has an impact on your day to day interactions, yes or no?”

Will licks his lips. *What do you think, asshole*, is what he actually wants to say, but he’s held up this far without saying anything controversial, so what’s another few hours.

“Well, yes *and* no,” he starts. “I have my own methods of interacting safely with people, but it’s a conscious effort to not read the room as it were. I extrapolate and I mirror, sometimes subconsciously.”

“So yes.”

“Yes, I guess it does,” he concedes.

“Like you did with Garret Jacob Hobbs.”

“Yes,” Will says with a small voice.

Metcalfe nods, waving a hand in a circle. “Ok. So, let’s take a walk through the day - you work at Quantico, and you teach young people about the perverse ways people think to kill other people. You have few personal interactions outside of class and consultations, save for psychiatric appointments masquerading as meetings between friends-”

(*You wince. Sick burn, you think, and try to wipe away imagined blistering from your mouth.*)

“Leading,” says the prosecutor, but Metcalfe plows on, merciless.

“-which in retrospect are used to either manipulate your encephalitis in early stages to initiate a sense of violence and dependence in you, or in later stages to enfold you in a completely inadvisable entrapment scheme organized by Jack Crawford, or in the mutual murder of that same person as a testament to your...commitment to a crime of, shall we say, foolish passion.”

Will feels his stomach going lower and lower. Against his better judgement, he looks at Hannibal, peacefully watching Will. His mouth is soft and upturned, communicating some gentler thing than Will is experiencing. It makes his heart race, decoding a message that will vanish if he doesn’t.

“Your *Honor*,” the prosecutor interjects again, frustrated.

“Sustained,” says the judge.

Metcalfe gives him a side glance, and Will in turn looks back to the lawyer and away from Hannibal - point already made, Will guesses.

Metcalfe paces, rocking on shiny shoes. “You say you have ways to interact safely with people, but do you think you could recognize if someone in your confidence was subverting that?”

Will thought he'd have to throw himself under the bus, but he had expected it to be earlier, rather than now. Stubbornness makes him honest anyway, to a fault. "Yes, I think I could," Will says with a rasp, eyes going between Metcalfe and the ground.

"But you were subverted to the point of evaluation with the Hobbs case, and subverted to the point of being thrown in jail for crimes that you didn't commit, and were convinced were yours at your initial arrest following the discovery of Abigail Hobbs' ear, isn't that the case? That you fed into someone else's desires and madness to the point of thinking you had perpetrated the crimes yourself?"

Will feels his teeth grind against each other until he starts charting the plains between them. Little furrows and valleys, made wider under stress, blunting his bite.

"While very sick, yes," he says shortly.

Metcalfe nods, like he's landed a hit.

"Do you agree that your empathy allows you to understand what other people want?"

"Yes, with the evidence provided by that person," he says shortly.

"Hannibal Lecter, by your account and the account of others, set you up to kill Garret Jacob Hobbs, deliberately misconstrued your mental health evaluation in whichever way pleased him, allowed you to be sick with a very dangerous autoimmune disease, to kill several people and claim it was you, to be sent to prison, to kill a coworker that moved on information you provided against him, to *very shortly after* be released from prison, to kill a man and desecrate the body, to be stabbed in conjunction with Abigail Hobbs' murder as repayment for a perceived betrayal--"

The worst kind of list - their grievances made public. Will glances to Hannibal again, still smiling softly.

“To leave you behind and kidnap Doctor DuMaurier to replace you, to then kill another man to let you know where he was, to *saw your skull open* as Agent Crawford confirmed, to be kidnapped alongside him, to carry you back to your own home, and then surrender on your behalf to law enforcement,” Metcalfe finishes, never pausing for breath, never losing his cadence. “Do you understand the logic in that, Mr. Graham?”

“Yes,” Will says without a doubt, because he does.

Metcalfe smiles, bright eyed. “You do?” he asks. “All of that? Most occurring within the course of less than six months?”

Will sits quietly, unable to answer. It sounds ridiculous out loud.

“You’re very entangled in Hannibal Lecter’s actions. Do you think it’s reasonable to say that your empathy disorder is why he picked you, and why you played along with it? Got swept up in the desires of the defendant, as well as Jack Crawford, leaving you in the unenviable position of having to please both?”

“Leading,” comes the rote reply.

*Leading*, Will says to himself, but paths lead to places, and that they lead doesn’t make them any less of a path. It’s theater for the jury, not for the judge. It does sound crazy. It sounds absolutely bonkers that Hannibal does all of that as a finale to his decades of work on his facade, burns it all down, and Will accepts it as a reflection of love instead of madness. Will doesn’t think it’s crazy. He thinks Hannibal wanted to be his friend, and not long after that, something more.

Maybe they’re both messed up after all.

(*Did you mention he gave you a baby, in the most euphemistic way possible? Do you tell them about that too and finish the painting? “Oh my dear,” he says to you across phone lines and miles of flat farmland that it crosses, “I would explain anything you asked of me,” and you’d accept it.*)

“Yes,” Will replies, “it’s possible.”

Metcalfe nods, eyebrows raising comically high. “No further questions,” he says, clapping his hands together.

It’s worse than being dismissed before the trial. It’s just wasting his time. All that anxiety, and preparation, made useless with one hard line against Will’s identity and Will’s loyalty. There’s not a juror in here that will consider him reliable outside of matching up time frames and accounting for events. Alana couldn’t have set it up better herself - Hannibal’s already gone and made sure there’s nothing to suggest Will knows what he’s doing.

(*You don’t most days, but not because of this. And does anyone else, when it comes down to it? Are you surrounded by the well-organized and the socially productive, planning their destinies by day and validating existence by night? You don’t think so. You think most people are lost. You even think Hannibal is, even if he might have not been for several years. Everything now is for show, painted to look perfect, but with a broken rudder.*)

He meets eyes with Hannibal once more, who uncharacteristically looks down, statue smooth once more. Will leaves the stand upset, and with perfect clarity, he understands that no one but Hannibal will comprehend why.

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He hangs out in the courthouse as long as possible, until the sun is going down, and most of the audience dissipates. If he can just leave everyone under the impression that he’s already gone, then he’ll only have Freddie to contend with when he gets back to the parking garage, and as far as he’s concerned, he has a dress shoe with her name on it and a strong drive to kick her ass with it if she gets in the way of his car.

It almost works - the worst of the crowd outside is gone with Hannibal and his police entourage. Surely if the defendant is gone, then everyone else of importance is too. Will avoids Alana and Margot, looking very fine and solemn for the well wishers, and for the cameras outside. He avoids Jack Crawford, who looks sheepish at Will’s early end to his testimony, a more effective poison to the jury than his *own* trial had been.

Will makes it to the corner of Lombard, before he's drawn out of his vacant ambling.

"Rough day, huh?"

Will looks up.

The round faced man again, with the appearance of someone who's sorry to have brought it up. He gives a kind of reluctant shrug. "The trial. I'm sorry if I came on a little strong this morning, but I've been here since the start to see the fireworks, and I wondered if anyone had told you what the previous witnesses said. Seems like they didn't, so I answered my own question."

"Kind of defeats the point of sequestering witnesses, if I come," Will sighs, and cracks his neck.

The round face man frowns curiously. "But you're not sequestered right? Since you're technically on the hook for aiding and abetting and have permission to hear testimony?"

Will, annoyed, gives him a longer glance, starting to walk along back to the car. A little overweight, trendy glasses, little laptop backpack and no recorder that Will can see, but far be it for him to assume. He doesn't see a camera, so no worries there, only to watch his mouth - just seems like a nice college kid. But what a strange question. "Are you press, or some kind of true crime enthusiast?" he asks, suspicious.

"Both, honestly," he laughs, "but I write human interest stories, and moonlight at interesting criminal hearings as a hobby. Keeps me on my toes, seeing felons and murderers as people instead of statistics for country club wine moms to stress out about."

Will rolls his eyes, but smiles despite himself. "Heaven forfend," he snorts.

They stand in silence for what is probably all of ten seconds, but to Will feels like ten minutes. He could be sleeping with that kind of time. He could take a shower. Funny how his value of time changes these days.

The round faced man scratches the back of his head, awkward once more. “I won’t hold you up,” he says. “Sure you’re busy with stuff back home. Do you think you’ll come to Hannibal’s testimony, even if yours was cut short?”

(*Do you think? Do you think you can bear to look at Hannibal’s smug face, happy to make the two of you into some cute future case study on shared psychotic disorders? Do you want to hear him make puns with half-truths and white lies, see from a spectators view what it looks like instead of as a participant?*)

“Don’t know, with those things needing taken care of at home,” Will replies acidly. “Not really a one man job, but I suppose I was the better pick, all things considered. I’ll be sure to call and let you know first,” he adds with a grimace, and the other man laughs, scratching the back of his head again. “Thanks for checking though.”

“No sweat,” the round faced man replies, like it honestly isn’t, and Will’s prickly response is reasonable. “Figured no one caught you yet, and thought I’d try my luck before you got back on your way. Have a nice night, Mr. Graham.” He gives a half-wave goodbye, and walks on his own away from the courthouse, into the yellow streetlights and darknesses between them beyond. No threats of bodily harm to remove him necessary. It’s almost refreshing.

(*Nice kid. Naive, you think, but nice.*)

Will shrugs, and walks off to do battle with Freddie, and the evening commute, and whether or not he’s going to need another stretch of freeway where Chiyoh can’t see him, and Beatrice can’t feed into his defeat.

He’s not followed by anyone else from the courthouse, and even Freddie seems to miss him when he takes a half-block longer route, working the anxiety out of his legs, and the sensation that there’s nothing else he can do at this point. Responsible parent but every bit as naive as that reporter, he thinks resentfully, incapable of making the hard decisions. Only good for soft questions.

# the indelible imprint a father leaves

In learning four languages as a small child, Hannibal has had a reliable leg-up for most of his life. He reads more, and more quickly. He has more opportunities in relationships and careers, and he lives in the relative comfort that his adaptability has prepared him for most situations, even if he does occasionally forget the word for things like “engine” or “pineapple” and must work his way through the problem obliquely.

(*“*Gàteau à L’ananas Caramélisé*,” you say with a flourish, and smirk to yourself for every compliment you get about the originality of your take on a pineapple upside down cake, because that’s what it is but damn it if you cannot remember the name in English until three bites in. You* ***know*** *what it is of course, but one must improvise, and you’ll certainly never admit to needing a second more save with acquaintances you have an easy understanding with.*)

(*So you admit it to no one.*)

This is of no consequence to Hannibal the Elder, chain smoking in his home as is his right as count and master of his home in the 60s, who switches readily between his repertoire of foreign word salads as a challenge for Hannibal. “Recognizing something in all its forms puts you at an advantage. It is necessary to not be taken for a fool,” he tells his son, and starts in on teaching irregular conjugations of verbs in French between writing lines in German.

One such line comes to mind today - a quote that Hannibal took to heart, repeated time and again in German and English alike when combating the years that would follow these lessons, filled with small grievances between the large ones that change the geography of his life: *Die große Notwendigkeit erhebt, die kleine erniedrigt den Menschen*. Great necessity elevates man, petty necessity casts him down.

As a person accustomed to straddling both kinds, usually simultaneously, Hannibal is beginning to think that perhaps Goethe didn’t have much of a sense of irony.

Goethe also likely never found himself subject to people trying to get shocking one-liners out of him while trying to remain calm and think about what’s best for his daughter by bird and

allegedly by birth, but seeing as Hannibal wasn't able to literally deliver her himself, he supposes he'll have to just take the DNA tests and Will's insistence at face value.

This is rather getting into the weeds, though.

The problem: the warden, while afraid to do anything *physical* to Hannibal, begins playing a game with Hannibal's time when the trial draws near, and throughout. The aging and irritable man can't prevent Hannibal from attending the court proceedings, or from seeing his lawyer, but he *can* trivially waste Hannibal's time.

As sole custodian of the world's most popular crazy person in this year of our Lord, he begins taking bribes for brief opportunities to speak with Hannibal Lecter, and goodness knows there's no shortage of people taking advantage of it. A little tête-à-tête off record, with no evidence of their presence other than the articles and speculative editorials that follow. Hannibal hopes the old man is at least making enough money to ferret away for his inevitable escape from the country - Hannibal fully intends to return the favor in full at some undisclosed date in the future. He hopes before his sentencing he can make a suggestion, like the Russian Taiga, or maybe the Amazon as being sufficiently difficult to navigate to buy the miserable dullard a few extra years.

It's largely only the ambitious professional journalists with money to burn that take advantage of this, while writers from the rags like the sort that suggested Will is doing due diligence paperwork while also industriously flirting with Hannibal from over the prison phone lines push gossipy narratives, they also don't really know what to do with Hannibal once he's literally in front of them. He who catches the devil hold him well, and so on. Ambitions of being the next Vice documentarian if they can but find the right crack to dig their fingers into, but too naive to know where to feel out the seam lines.

(*You have very clever hands, and have grown adept at finding them, a prospector of dark lodes that will smoke and smoulder with the right catalyst. Useful if charted, more interesting if destroyed. Even Will was not able to avoid this entirely. Even your love of Will doesn't keep you entirely from wanting to do it again to him, a perverse Sisyphus with your rock to roll up the hill each day.*)

They will hopefully someday make a nice hearty *cassoulet*, or perhaps a plate of *suho meso* to be served with a sweet wine.  Indistinguishable from each other, and far more enriching as

food than people. He tells a few of them that. It helps pass the half-hour of time that he is put in front of them and left to decide whether to chat or to sit in stony silence.

"I can sue the detention center if you want," Byron says with that gleam in his eye that captures Hannibal's attention and his annual retainer, but Hannibal waves him off.

"I need my entertainment as much as the next man," he says, and smiles in a way that makes people nervous, shark-eyed lawyers and law enforcement not excluded. "I shall keep you apprised to what drivel I feed them."

Hannibal likes games, but this one is tiresome when he is already stretched thin by his scant intelligible interactions with anyone other than Byron, and the smug warden acting as if he's finally done it, he's figured out to safely "pull one over" on Hannibal the Cannibal. He had the energy for it when he had no cause to think Will was ready to see him again, and when he didn't have a baby, and that he is now saving all of his best madman antics to corroborate Chilton's and Alana Bloom's stories of his insanity. It's entertaining for the first week, but by the time Jack Crawford, Frederick Chilton, Alana Bloom, and Freddie Lounds have taken the stand, the questions start growing more outlandish and personally needling.

Hannibal responds in kind.

It had been fun telling *The Baltimore Sun's* special interests reporter that his unfortunate patterned shirt brought to mind a set of napkins at an Easter Sunday brunch at the Holiday Inn. "Something best suited for a mid-90's banquet hall, and an aging grandmother." This is allegedly reported as Hannibal suggesting he would eat the man for breakfast, to which Hannibal thinks the shirt would keep him from ever seriously considering the man as food, but alas.

There's a certain satisfaction in relaying an old recipe for *solyanka* to the crime reporter for *The New York Times* without ever actually answering any of his questions - just a progression of ingredients, preparations for salo, olives, capers, reindeer meat, really anything that he vaguely recalls seeing as options. He's told the food and dining department of the periodical rises to the occasion and lists it as their recipe of the week. It's probably something he would frame and laugh over in the future, but for now was merely one way of many to spend thirty minutes unplanned with a journalist.

(*Freddie, you note, doesn't quite dare, but submits an actual request to your lawyer - the wisdom of the only person who's ever gotten close to actually being eaten in what in hindsight is less of a romantic dinner over lomo saltado, and more of a catfishing attempt, or so your lawyer has described it as such. Perhaps another time. Practice makes perfect, and Freddie seems to understand that you may someday want to practice. Your lawyer declines - "she's a material witness," Byron says to you, and Freddie takes this with surprising grace. She's already gotten all the good stuff between you and Will, even if she hasn't gotten the* ***best*** *between you yet.*)

"So good of you to visit," Hannibal says to a white-faced older gentleman from *The Washington Post* who must have thought he was above being disturbed by his journalistic pursuits, warzone veteran that he is. "I *lived* for your coverage of Councilman Isley's commemoration in his much beloved parking lot. It's always such a pleasure to have like-minded coverage of your finer pieces, yes?"

The man leaves, more convinced of Hannibal's madness than ever.

Hannibal returns to his cell, and thinks of spring sunshine, and the loud rush of wings flying from woods to spire to nest, back and forth until he is to be disturbed again. He considers what he has yet to discover, but anticipates as one awaits a letter from someone beloved, a much more satisfactory way to waste the hours.

(*Will Beatrice be blonde the way you were as a boy? Does she fuss at strangers as Will does? Do you need to think about chromosomal irregularities of a same-sex union's avifaunally engineered baby?*)

Maybe Hannibal is a little bit mad after all.

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It is a disappointment that Will is not able to bring Beatrice to his testimony day, even if it is an expected one. This is more than made up by the fact that Hannibal will be able to see Will for the better part of several hours trying his very best to indulge stupid questions with a straight face - both eye candy and *schadenfreude* in a single sitting, if a man wearing a decade old suit can be described as eye candy anyway.

“No, Graham’s alone,” says Byron in a low whisper when he joins him at the defendant’s table and before the witness is called for the day. “No sign of your other family either, so I’d suspect that they’re together.

Hannibal nods, pulling at the black lapels of his coat, always dressed to the nines, but today in his most infernal of outfits. Perhaps he’ll wear white on his own testimony day with a boutonniere and a pocket square. Something jaunty for the society pages. One must keep up appearances that one actually cares to keep up.

(*Smile on, curtain up, the audience in the chairs, and you now on the stage - show nothing in your face, not even your monstrousness. Especially that part, the part that still feels envy, and disappointment, and the crushing obsessive need to go home wherever is home these days.*)

Trust Will to stare at his feet and shrug from the dark corners of the hallway rather than enter the room and sit with the sea of spectators before he needs to. This is a disappointment as well, albeit Hannibal doesn’t like to admit to what extent he has missed seeing things other than poorly painted concrete walls, the blue of a mattress cover, and the incandescent glow of the lights in the penitentiary’s halls.

“Never to the table before the dinner bell,” he teases, and Byron just shakes his head.

Of course it’s perfectly reasonable that this meeting of child and Father #2 can’t be arranged - between the crush of the local and national press, a surprising number of well-wishers that should seek psychiatric care, and potential unshaven and hyper religious courthouse bombers that should also receive psychiatric care and that have taken it upon themselves to camp out in the courtyard and make a general nuisance of themselves, it’s probably for the best. Contrary to a number of hand-painted picket line signs and laughable television interviews with previous colleagues that couldn’t diagnose their way out of a shallow bag on their heads, Hannibal has no interest in harming children, much less eating them, and the act of carrying an infant through that foolish throng would be harmful.

(*When pressed on the issue, you don’t even have an academic interest. You, after all, know exactly what children taste like. Chilton likes to think he’s going to wring blood from that particular stone, but that stone has settled, and you have buried it in the strata of years past, and will excavate it only to prove that it existed, not to teach others in greater detail about it.*)

Hannibal Lecter isn't an idiot. Hannibal Lecter knows dropping a month-old baby girl in his arms in full view of all of the dross would be gossip fodder for half a century. While the part of him that delights in scandal and drama thinks this would be hugely entertaining, the parts of him that are jealous and secretive (*and they are numerous*) imagine hiding her, like he can press a wing over her infant downy body, closed-eyed and soft with newness, and hide her from creatures in the tall grass or the branches of trees.

What would Will do, Hannibal wonders, in the face of handing his charge to Hannibal? How would his face warp from that spitting anger to the careful, withdrawn truth of his fear to hand a baby to the man that tore open the last child he handled of theirs? Practicalities and delusional protesters aside, would Will ever choose to put Beatrice in Hannibal's hands?

Hannibal smooths the collar of his shirt. He aligns the cuffs. He pretends to not mind the emptiness of the arms above them.

Still, Hannibal keeps his face forward, and his shoulders high, and his eyes sharp-sharp-sharp on the stiff form of Will Graham who is as empty-armed and disconcerted as he can be, walking to his testimony chair as one walks to the guillotine. In another life, it might have been one for him. Hannibal knows better than to involve Will anymore than is necessary much like he knows not to involve Beatrice, but Will has the unfortunate destiny of involvement in this spectacle by proxy. (*You are the sum of who you keep company with, is what you think when you consider that, and Will only keeps company with you and a very small part of you.*)

He smiles at the low shoulders, the hesitant eyes, and the small imperfections at the once pressed but now crinkled collar of his suit. He smiles especially at Will's long gaze when he does gather his courage, rather like the scattering of clouds from over the surface of the moon, and now there is nothing but white light casting out into the dark, and Hannibal must absorb it in his shadows, keeping it all for himself.

"Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, under penalty and pain of perjury, so help you God?" asks the bailiff.

"I do," says Will, because Will's mouth struggles to speak lies the same way Will's mind struggles to disguise his thoughts. Besides, the truth is stranger than fiction, and there's hours

of it to talk about and dissect.

Hannibal is proud to watch Will hold his composure against the whole ugly affair, but even Hannibal can see it wear away at him, drawing sand away from the banks of his shores. The prosecutor builds Will up. Will's actions tear himself down. The prosecutor tries to tangle his narrative. The narrative is already quite tangled, so Will looks snared in it either way. He makes it to the recess and practically flees the room, only half done with his day and desperate to go.

Hannibal wishes he could prepare him for what comes next - the backhanded end to his long story, planned, a kindness dealt by Hannibal that will feel like a slap instead.

"No further questions," says Byron, once Will's credibility is in tatters.

It brings to mind Samson, shorn of his hair. Will's look at Hannibal is sad, and bewildered. Hannibal knows Will understands it, but Hannibal knows Will is in the business of understanding and still not liking what he understands. He leaves the stand with the sort of hangdog expression saved for those who are sentenced, not those who have been freed of their obligations to any such fate.

(*How you love him. How you cannot seem to stop hurting him no matter your love.*)

Hannibal wishes he could say something to him - maybe another call, something hard to misconstrue as an insult, or, according to Byron, a come-on directed at an intern or paralegal if the grapevine is to be given any sort of consideration. Laughable that Hannibal would try and romance a paralegal, but he supposes at one point it was laughable that he would romance a profiler for serial killers.

One of life's little ironies, Hannibal guesses, and fails to fully hide his discomfort when the chains at his ankles catch when he tries to shift into a lean.

"Well that went about as well as anything is going to," Byron says before the marshals come to collect Hannibal, eyes drawn to Hannibal's aborted effort to cross his legs.

(*Even you sometimes fall prey to muscle memory - everyone's subject to the food chain, and you especially to predation by your own actions.* )

The cuffs at his ankles are creasing the ends of a very nice pair of twill black trousers, and the thickness of his socks does nothing to disguise that the cuffs have been tightened to the point of discomfort, but they strike a nice contrast to the burgundy of his suit jacket. The day is a success, even if it doesn't feel entirely like one.

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(*Your Beatrice is only now seeing shapes, learning to smile, and aware. Despite grandiose ideas to the contrary thanks to her immaculate conception by wishful thinking, she is not born with your innate knowledge. She will not ask "What are you thinking" as Dante's Beatrice does when Will returns to Wolf Trap, sad from his speech, even if you imagine it now, and her years older, and her in a reflection of Mischa, or Simonetta, or Murasaki because you don't know what she looks like, but those are girls of times past that you have loved. "Reply to me, the water has not yet obliterated your sad memories," she says and kneels at Will's feet when he sits in the pastoral comfort of the farmhouse's living room, at home with the dog hair as she is with the wisdom of her namesake's divine knowledge. And Will's memories are very sad indeed.*)

(*She won't of course. She's a month-old, and from all reports, a perfectly normal month-old. She'll sleep, or she'll scream, or she'll eat or squirm and pass into the arms of the man you love like a ventricle of your own heart because that's what infants do. Your Beatrice must learn her grace. She will learn it from the father she is gifted to, not the one who named her.*)

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Prison, much like having children, is a series of routines that are designed for the ease and comfort of caretakers rather than their charges. The lights brighten by 7 am, the meals are bland as to not upset anyone, and bedtime is strictly enforced at 8pm. The irony of the blandness of the meals hugely upsetting him is not lost on Hannibal, but he's had worse, and he'll likely have worse again in the future.

He's almost come to see the quiet of the penitentiary halls as a welcome reprieve, when he is not ushered, illegally he'd add, into talking with sociopaths interested in speaking with another sociopath. The trial by all accounts in the last month has been an absolute circus - a veritable judicial Disneyland, complete with obnoxious flashing cameras, people wearing and carrying strange memorabilia to commemorate the occasion, and all the excitement of "whatever shall we do next?"

(*Incidentally, you have always thought the Disneyland enthusiasts are their own category of mentally ill. Matching t-shirts, rodent ears, and entire family vacation budgets spent on throwing themselves into the throngs of other like-minded but competing families, sometimes year over year? American capitalism truly is a horror story of values gone awry.* ***You****, for one, will be taking* ***your*** *child to Mallorca, or Switzerland, or literally anywhere other than a manufactured version of the Matterhorn, American West, or the tropics at the first available date. If in the unfortunate circumstance that Will is one of the amusement park acolytes, you have certainly used hypnotism and psychic driving on him for much more difficult ends - erasing the desire to wait in line for spinning tea cups should be the work of only a couple of days.*)

(*The two of you really need to work on your communication and compromise skills, stork-ordered children notwithstanding.*)

While Hannibal chafes at the idea of being brought down to his most basic of needs, as though curfews and nutrition were the *actual* concerns of the facility rather than a series of checkmarks that need filling to avoid legal recourse, it's not wholly terrible. It's likely synchronous to what Will is doing even now.

Will had complained once, early in their acquaintance, that he was bothered by the possibility of living in tandem with Garret Jacob Hobbs. It made for a good profile to fall that far into someone else's routine. It probably wasn't all that far off from what Will would have been doing otherwise - Hobbs, married, a father, a machinist, a hunter, all things that Will Graham hasn't been, amount to very little of what Hobbs was *like* . He lived in his own head, and he had fears of what was living in it alongside him, and hid in his hobbies. The routine needed to be done not because it is a desire, but because it is necessary.

In this, Will's empathy didn't have to work hard to be Garret Jacob Hobbs because they are the same person on different sides of a cataclysmic event. The moments before killing emotionally fulfills a person, and the moments after, when the fear of it being fulfilling has dissipated. All the hours in between are busy work. Repetition is a cloak that they both learn

to wear. There's hardly a profile to slide into - just the same paint color hiding monstrosity at different stages.

The weekend means no court. There are no changes to his morning procedurals, no crisp suits delivered by a well meaning aide to Byron Metcalfe's office, or the short armored ride to the courthouse. There's no summary of events in the minutes before the judge takes his bench, or ominous eyed FBI officials that are far beyond the ilk of Jack Crawford's sense of justice and more oriented to convenience and falling out of the public view. This suits Hannibal for the moment. He too would like to align in banality with someone.

Breakfast at 7:00 am is a parallel to 7:00 am feedings, which are not so early as 4:00 am feedings, but still on a schedule that he can picture. Unfulfilling meals eaten in haste, because there are other things to worry about - Will balancing Beatrice, and seven dogs, and how he feels about his family by proxy living in his house. Hannibal balances thoughts of how best to continue erasing Will from the narrative of the case, how to get out of this place, how to get out of this place and still hedge his bets with Alana Bloom and Margot Verger. Some flavorless toast eaten between them, separated in fields and firths between Baltimore and Wolf Trap. Random naps to dream of other places. Lunch at noon because they must. Dinner by 6, lights out at 8 because 4:00 am is rushing closer once more, and neither one has clear answers on how to escape the routine and be with each other once more, and the baby, like prison hours, needs the stability of consistency and separation from the absurdity of the trial.

The mundanity of the day-to-day is not telling of their desire, or a measure of their matching darkness, but they are together in this if not in any other way. They can't talk anymore, so this will have to do.

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The irritations insist on reinstating themselves on a Wednesday evening, sandwiched between depositing Hannibal in the lockbox that is his cell, the return of the prison uniform, and what should have been long since over visiting hours. It's difficult to know the exact time beyond the dimming of the overhead lights, but fatigue and the dull ache of hunger behind an uninspiring dry chicken dinner say it's late, and that he has no business being in the interview room save another act of pettiness.

Hannibal notes this one, as he does all the others, and considers how slowly he can excise the skin of the fingers from the warden before he'll need to utilize fludrocortisone acetate to

prevent syncope. He thinks the man's hands are fat enough to make *spirgai*.

He sits, and crosses his hands like this is all expected regardless.

In a rare moment, Hannibal is not sure who sits with him today - one of the seasoned old hands in the field of writing, or one of the greenhorns, struck mute in the reality of Hannibal Lecter, MD, Psychiatrist, Surgeon, 3 Michelin Star Maneater. **If** the gentleman from *The Baltimore Sun* is to be listened to, a two-time guest at his table in the days before orange jumpsuits and beguiling profilers who convince Hannibal to do all the wrong things. Hannibal is flattered by the rating. It would be a delight if he had been qualified to make it.

"Doctor Lecter," says a young man, round faced, generally pleasant and unflinching when he is walked into the interview room of the Chesapeake Detention Facility by an unfriendly correctional officer that always looks at Hannibal like he doesn't cook his meals first.

An absurd assumption. Just *consider* all the parasites and bacteria in human meat.

Hannibal smiles, the tight kind that doesn't rise much past the corners of his mouth.

It has been five days since Will's testimony - the passing of a Saturday and Sunday, and the onward march of the legal proceedings. It has been three days of cross-examining Margot Verger, who lies like a champion, but that even Alana's scattering of the hairs from Hannibal's neck at the crime scene don't *quite* fit the picture and make her have an unusually difficult examination with the prosecutor. Mason's kidnapping of Will and Hannibal across country lines is excessively messy, and excessively full of receipts, bereaved Italian wives, and includes at least one character witness in the form of a hog farmer from Cantabria. Margot bears all this scrutiny like a queen. She knows what it's like to wear the wrong shoe color after Labor Day in the society pages, and kiss the wrong cheeks, and smile at the wrong jokes - what's a little jump from there to the headliners?

This is the sort of writer Hannibal expects, no matter his unflinching round face - the kind to poke at Margot Verger for her blouse, rather than her sororius desire to smother her brother.

“I’m afraid I don’t recall the pleasure of a prior acquaintance,” Hannibal says, dryly.

“Oh gosh, you definitely wouldn’t have,” he replies with a bobbing head of agreement. Asian, near sighted with stylish frames, inclined to laugh at himself instead of feel embarrassed, Hannibal posits. The reporter’s shirt is cheap, he notes, but is very neatly pressed like he wants to leave a good impression. Hannibal can respect that, even if he is considering even now how best to scare him off.

“More the type to cover weddings in the Hamptons than a big case like yours,” adds the young man. “I think you might have been to a few of them, but I definitely would have been beneath notice.”

“Flattery is a cheap currency,” Hannibal replies to that in turn.

“And readily accepted like Visa cards all the same,” says the young man, smiling hesitantly. “Jon Sekine,” he continues with another excited nod. “I’d shake your hand, but the warden seemed to think it was funny to suggest I’d lose fingers like sushi rolls.”

Hannibal smirks at this - perhaps an inspiration for later, considering his own thoughts on the subject. “The warden is rather taken with his ham-fisted cultural references,” he slyly nods. “One would think he’s never met someone not born in white suburbia, but I suspect that might actually be the case.”

Jon Sekine smiles in return, the kind with disguised teeth - the kind Murasaki and Chiyoh have perfected, and that Hannibal has emulated from pre-teen to the modern day, admiring their inscrutable faces. “Do you think it would blow his mind to let him know I have a fish allergy?”

Hannibal sighs in amusement, but feels the shadow of deceitfulness - not the fish allergy, but the sense of being put into the confidences of others. The obviousness of the pressed shirt. The united otherness in the face of the warden’s Good Old Boy Americanness. Jon Sekine wants something from Hannibal, and has paid to get close enough to get it at an odd hour, so he must not dislike doing business with the warden so much as to gather his scruples and take the ball home, as it were.

Hannibal distrusts it, even as he feels the thrill of the kind of games he actually enjoys. Rare with no Will and no Bedelia to speak with, no patients to twist up in knots. Perhaps he'll use his thirty minutes after all.

"Rare in children, likely to manifest in adults," says Hannibal, leaving a pause in between to take in the man's expression. "When's the first time you bit off more than you could chew, Jon?"

To his credit, Jon Sekine nods through a brief flush, laughing breathlessly, like he's expected this. "You don't like to start gently, do you, Doctor Lecter? Not today, for what it's worth, though I am feeling a bit out of my depth."

"An appetizer shouldn't be mild," Hannibal replies. "It should tease. Not much on the social agenda during the weekdays in the spring?" he asks, eyes sweeping the table. No notes, no recorder, not even a cell phone, just a thin carry case for a laptop. Everything in this room is allegedly secure, but Hannibal laughs at the delusion of that idea. What is Jon Sekine's specific interest in the sordid musings of Baltimore's most and least popular figure of the year?

Hannibal plows on. Sometimes further digging is needed, even if most reporters are shallow and only aspire to hidden depths.

"I had rather hoped the bored moneyed housewives and well-to-dos of the tri-city area would have many anecdotes to share about their rare encounter with the serial killer at the galas," he says, tickled at the notion. "Perhaps turn it into a luncheon. I've always aspired to inspire occasions for wearing fancy hats and drinking in the middle of the day. A Kentucky Derby to see who can run their mouth best to victory."

"I'm from Boston, so I wouldn't know the DC ladies, but I know gambling sports anyway." Sekine's smile doesn't change. "Bets are placed on the wrong horses, if that's the occasion," he says easily. "Somebody's coming out of this looking like a shiny new dime instead of a bent nickel."

Hannibal turns his head. The pointedness of the comment brushes his attention the way the pressed collar does.

The young man's tone changes when he sees this, and he raises a hand to scratch the back of his head. "But yeah," he laughs. "Gotta put in my time with my personal interests like any other person I guess. Early in the morning before work, or in the evening when the office hours are over. You'd know something about that, if the honey-do list you've got going is anything to go by, and if you can get away with calling it honey-do's."

(*You agree, but concede it's not an unfair description - while you enjoyed convincing Mason to carve his face off and paralyzing him, it was also arguably by request by someone who would probably sulk for the next decade if he knew someone called him your 'honey'. Everything else is for the love of the job, if there must be an idiom attached to your behaviors.*)

"Personal pursuits are essential to healthy self-perception and meaningful productivity," Hannibal says blandly, something he has likely said a hundred of a hundred times, an easy one-liner that most people understand but spectacularly fail to act on.

Sekine keeps scratching - a nervous habit, perhaps deflecting. Hannibal wonders what it is exactly that makes him nervous. "Hard to break into other fields of coverage without having to catch some open doors before and after hours."

"Or closed, I suspect," Hannibal rejoins, and feels a satisfaction at the young man's wincing admission when he nods. "You'll have to mind what you confess to here, Jon. I'm afraid they're in the habit of misconstruing recordings of me for tacky come-ons these days, and this is a strange time to be visiting me. I'd hate for your ambitions to be extinguished by a misunderstanding of our relationship."

"Well *that's* a strong description. Spend a lot of time covering up sticky homosexual liasons?"

"Covering up is rather counterproductive to a liason as a participant," Hannibal replies with a toothy grin, palms and eyebrows up. "But yes, since my stint in prison started, it seems to have become a highlighted bullet point in my public dealings, with some recurring tired punchlines if my lawyer is to be believed and encouraged to pursue libel cases. Don't drop the soap, favors for favors, prison wives, et cetera, et cetera."

Hannibal continues, leaning back. “One would think my sexual leanings had been nothing if not obvious prior to now, but perhaps my conquests didn’t merit mention in your periodical, as is polite.”

(*You once wore a powdery lavender and charcoal grey suit to the Frick Collection’s annual fund charity event a few years ago, famously did your social rounds before seducing a visiting lecturer from the Netherlands, and left together before he said his speech for the night and promptly excused him from your home the following morning. He was allegedly heartbroken. It seems tragic that a largely benign call to Will merits scandal and gossip articles when your prior hedonism is so much more entertaining for small minded people who can’t grasp the complexity of your relationship with Will.*)

(*Maybe loving someone is vulgar, and you just didn’t realize until you had something to love.*)

Sekine laughs. “You don’t strike me as the type.”

“To be homosexual, or to be a prison wife?”

“To care what people think of you - it must be liberating, not having to worry about keeping the whole charade up anymore.”

“I would argue it’s never been a charade, just that people didn’t care to look into my extracurriculars the way that they don’t care to look into yours,” Hannibal says, redirecting. Tricky, tricky, talking about intention. Hannibal’s a madman. Hannibal’s not supposed to fully understand he’s rotten to the core. “I would happily show someone with the interest and stomach for it how to make a *pancita* or *trippa alla romana*.”

They both grin. Hannibal’s is hungry - nothing to hold him over until the end of this comedy of a trial. Sekine’s, however, is a nervous one again, fingers scratching in a rhythm against his scalp.

“Well that’s certainly more than I can chew,” says Sekine with a shrug. “I think you already gave Marcus at *The Times* more cooking instruction than he knew what to do with, and I’d

hate to repeat someone else's work."

"True artists hate a replica," Hannibal nods, familiar with that particular flavor of disdain. "Only novices copy without transformation. That being said, I don't have anything *just for you*."

(*That's for Will. That's for Beatrice.*)

"No cute statements about your alleged obsession's time on the stand?"

Ah, there's the novice underneath the shrewd line of thinking until now. Hannibal's almost disappointed to see it. Hannibal puts on a placid but closed off smile, a mirror to Sekine's.

"Too heavy handed, Jon - we aren't friendly enough for those sorts of commiserations. You'll have to settle for news of my sexual prowess and my feelings on your housewives this evening, as it's late, and I have my own office hours to keep tomorrow. I'm sure it will make an excellent blog article for your passion project," he adds lightly, unkind. "Or perhaps your day job? You may have found the rare gap issue to unite current events and the relationship speculation columns."

The young man's shoulders roll with disappointment though he keeps a smooth, happy face. Natural, but practiced, someone accustomed to being brushed off. Aware of his mistake, smart enough to concede to it.

"I guess it will," he says, tongue twisting to stay respectful to the very end. "You'd be surprised what people find interesting. Doesn't have to be grizzly...just has to be sad, or funny. Both ideally."

"All three if you can manage it," Hannibal replies to that with a nod of his own. "I'm sure you'll find a way."

They sit in silence. Two minutes. Three minutes pass.

As expected, Sekine breaks first with no outlet for all those nerves. “I guess I’m dismissed?”

Hannibal smiles, and let’s another half a minute pass before replying.

“I don’t have any more to say that you haven’t already heard, if you wish to be different from your compatriots,” Hannibal says smoothly. “You’re welcome to speculate wildly about my relationships and my outfit tomorrow to your heart’s content if you have a proper press pass - I’ve been saving all the best stories for a full house. Big day, when you testify at your own trial.” He winks, and adds nothing else.

Sekine looks from the correctional officer at the glass of the door, back to Hannibal, and back again with that same shrewdness he afforded Hannibal’s comment about betting. He’s weighing his chances at a further question, whereas Freddie would have blurted hers out by now.

Another gamble, played delicately. Hannibal admires it, and chooses to reward his gumption.

“Ask your question, Jon,” Hannibal says, crossing his fingers together, ignoring the desire to lean back and press them to his knee. “Quickly. I suspect you will be the last afforded, or I suppose expensed as the case may be, an interview with me before sentencing.”

Jon Sekine’s face takes on a curious blankness, shaking off his doubt, though everything about his posture is friendly. “Who would you put your money on? Coming out on the top of all this? You seem happy to dance around the subject of yourself, but you don’t talk much about other people other than to make fun of them.”

(*You’re not - happy to dance around the subject. You disdain these people, and all their frivolous intrigue and nosiness. You hate the waste of time they represent now that you are no longer in a position to want to waste it after all. There’s a sorrowful looking man that you want to keep like a secret, toting your most fervent wish around with the passive irritation of a put-upon single parent. This is all in the way. This is the prison that walls and bars were never going to be as hard to scale, where being seen together is unfortunately worse for your intentions than being seen apart.*)

Hannibal does what he does best instead - he obfusticates.

"Some trivia," Hannibal says, stretching his ankles unseen beneath the metal table. "For your betting comment earlier. The idea of a bent nickel being worthless has always struck me as funny. It's a curious thing about American currency," Hannibal smiles again, "that it costs 11 cents to manufacture a nickel, bent or otherwise. It's only a stubborn refusal to reevaluate the material costs that keeps them in circulation as they are."

"More valuable than a dime, shiny or otherwise, and incidentally also the most common contact allergen, to bookend things nicely," Sekine says with a nod, and a strange satisfaction that Hannibal can't quite place. "Since we're trading trivia."

That feels pointed, just as it did to start. Hannibal dislikes it, something of the prying he is accustomed to being pointed back at himself. Not putting himself in the confidences of others now, is he, this young reporter with the nervous hands? Hannibal keeps his smile featureless, unblinking, and watches the polite look on Sekine's face go tighter.

"Thank you for your time tonight, Doctor Lecter," he says, still mindful of the niceties.

"Much obliged for the small bites after dinner," Hannibal replies, staring him down, looking for where he missed the crack in the friendly façade.

(*You did. You missed something here. You feel it the way you feel Anthony Dimmond's fumblings at your alibi, and Rinaldo Pazzi's pawing at your earliest work, a suspicion cast on you.*)

Jon Sekine stands, only the small backpack to account for, and the correctional officer comes to unlock the door after a wave through the glass. The young man doesn't push for more again - he leaves with that pleasant round face of his, and a modest scratch of the head. The haste of his retreat is unmarked, and Hannibal finds him considering coins, like they're rattling in his pocket even now.

Nickel - the greatest alloy for precious metals, drawing them out as the sun draws out seeds from the ground into bloom. Hematotoxic, irritant, historically confused for the sterility of silver, but poisonous and magnetic instead. Valuable in its practicality, criminally underappreciated. Obvious, but not very obvious. Nothing that Hannibal thinks a reporter could spin into gold.

Hannibal is ushered into his isolated space with all the space that can reasonably be afforded to someone wheeled around in cuffs, and restraints, whose manners are perfectly obliging but that everyone is afraid of regardless. Shouldn't handle wild animals bare-handed, docile or not. That's wise. Hannibal's not so sure he's inclined to docility after all.

He finds himself not quite anxious in anticipation, but he does stare into the ceiling at lights out, and wonders why he feels - *susierzinęs, irritata, énervé* - irritated. He feels dug at, the poke of questions like a spade turning over dirt. Hannibal flexes his hands, and drifts away from the itching there to think instead of bedtime, and cotton swaddles, and the low lights of the heater in Will's living room, casting the room into warm shadows. That is better.

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"Do you ever consider the calculus of your decisions to see where the mistakes might be?" asks Will from the kitchen counter of the Hobbs' residence. He leans in his blood-splattered clothes and glasses quite casually next to the slumped body of Garret Jacob Hobbs, baby in a bright yellow blanket in the grip of one arm, and a bottle in the other. On the floor between them, Abigail Hobbs' is bleeding to death, perhaps dead, a forgotten child between them. In the yard beyond the windows, where Mrs. Hobbs should be similarly dispatched, a flight of storks pick at the winter grass, the long lines of their beaks like wetted knives.

Hannibal looks for regret at this image, but finds none save the regret of Will's past grief over it.

(*You remember your excitement the first time around, like puzzle pieces snapping into place. The birds are new, but so is the baby, and your occasional self-doubt that at the time you lived without.*)

"Numbers are practical things. A sensible and well-executed equation should have a limited number of outcomes," Hannibal replies. He feels removed from the scene, this strange

amalgamation of dread and coziness, hands not tacky with Abigail's blood from her neck this time.

He's offered his apology. Will's holding it right now.

"Assuming you understand all the variables," says Will, peering up. He does not have the wild look of a man who shoots ten times to fell a single target. He is centered, calm, and clutching at his tiny burden, purposeful. "Assuming nothing changes."

Hannibal nods, watching Will adjust his grip, listening to the small sounds of the baby working at her bottle.

Things did change. He changed - that's something he didn't ever expect. He doesn't know how to account for the avarice he feels for things that he wants. He's never really wanted something outside curiosity, but this is akin to need, as surely as watching his lungs or his pancreas sat out on a surgical table, detached at the bronchi and shrinking each moment they are parted from him. They are irreplaceable.

(*You have plans, and plans for your plans, but you're already concerned you'll miss a sign, or not read the right line, and everything is hinged on the next week and not ending up beyond the scope of your influence. They can be happy without you. You don't think you can be happy without them.*)

Hannibal wakes in the grey dark of the cell, hands grabbing at nothing.

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The day he takes the stand, Hannibal Lecter wears a grey Prince of Wales check suit in black and white, with a kidney red shirt that cuts the collar line with long lapels. He is not allowed to put the metal collar stays into them to make them sit as sharp and structured as he would like, but Hannibal supposes it would be a bit much to ask for.

He pulls them down - two corners and a long ‘v’ of venous crimson cutting into an otherwise mundane outfit. Alizarin, like the dye used to highlight bones under translucent skin, because nobody but one person in a world of 8 billion people will know what they’re looking at without Hannibal’s assistance.

(*Maybe instead what they should see: the red of your mouth against the white and black of your body. Not so much from blood as it is from nature - the shape of kin, nesting in the high places of where you come from, and you, not so angry as you were in the years in between, learning to take the same shape to be with your mate again someday, rustling at winter grass and waiting to migrate to a warm summer home. Red is a color of vitality, and only the blind witnesses to your testimony cannot see it for more than a color of death.*)

When Hannibal swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, so help him God or any other entity that cares to be accountable for cannibals and Oscar Wilde types taken to their most aesthete extreme, he thinks that the prosecutor gives a full body groan.

This is unfair - Hannibal is not really one for outright lies. It is *far* more satisfying to tell the truth and have someone arrive at the wrong conclusion by no merit other than their own assumptions.

He has been reliably informed by Bedelia that he reminds her at times of a professor she had in her undergraduate that was more preoccupied with humbling people than with giving a proper overview of cultural anthropology and logic, and that if rating the tenured staff had been standard in her day that she would have given him an ‘F’ for officious bullshit. Seeing as Hannibal found the majority of general education classes at the collegiate level to be officious bullshit to begin with, he accepts this criticism more readily than Bedelia’s other criticisms pointed towards his illogical wrath at Will for being justifiably upset about incarceration and being framed, or his obsession with medieval poets with enduring crushes on local inspiring youths, and if there’s some kind of intersectionality there between those topics.

But that is neither here nor there.

Hannibal stands by his honesty. “I do so swear,” he says like he’s ordering brunch somewhere far from here. There’s only a few laughs from the audience, quiet enough to not earn expulsion, but loud enough to be heard.

Something is here though - Will Graham, black suit, maroon tie, to the back of the courtroom against the wall in the standing space nearest to the door, arms crossed and mouth twisted in what looks to be from this distance to be a *very* bitter but amused smile. His hands are as empty now as they were on his own testimony day, but now hidden in the safety of his body drawn in on itself where Freddie Lounds can't see it, Byron Metcalfe can't see it, and Alana Bloom can't see it to be frustrated by it - the smile, the suit, his presence. All hidden from view, save the witness box, the more observant of the jury, and the judge, as it should have always been.

(*He matches you. Not as vivid in a mirror, or obviously to the onlookers in the courthouse, but you recall reading that birds see in more brilliant color, the shades of dull feathers alive with heat and scintillating vivid streaks known only to each other. You can see it because you are meant to, and you pray for the same from him over and over again.*)

# your kids are your own fault

Will's digital footprint is small. An impressive feat in an age of increasingly digital existences, with symmetrical squares of perfect lives unfolding, liveblogging vacations that are only being shared to prove you are doing something, and the inexplicably primitive websites that govern things that actually should be improved by the internet, like the gas company, or the paid leave forms for work.

Sure, Will's digital *representation* isn't small - he didn't exactly sign up for a media storm surrounding his normally quite boring life. It would probably break Freddie Lounds' heart to know that prior to profiling for Jack Crawford that the most exciting thing that might happen in a given month is an unexpected training day that gives Will time off on a Wednesday afternoon to do something just as mundane as his weekends, like fishing, or getting around to restocking the basics like rice and beans when he doesn't have to joust with his grocery cart on a busy Sunday. Oh *no*, his *representation* is very colorful and would have the general population think that he spends his days in a dysphoric stupor when he's not jacking off to revenge plots and other people's very extreme malfeasance.

It's really more akin to mentally turning revenge plots and malfeasance in hand like a collection of porcelain figurines, which is an order of magnitude less interesting, and probably just as degenerate, but that's a debate for another day.

That all being said, Will's personal internet use is unremarkable - a few off-colored browser searches periodically out of curiosity of necessity, an obligate scroll through a number of reputable news sites for conversation pieces and to generally stay abreast to society, but no social media, no blogs, no real desire to show what he's doing with his life.

(*An example search:* ***best way to clean baby spit-up from inside nose****. This doesn't yield exactly what you want. A Google search amendment:* ***best way to clean baby spit-up from inside parent's nose****. Turns out the method is the same, and now you need a larger bulb syringe for a grown adult male instead of an infant sized one.*)

(*A search two hours later:* ***cerebrospinal fluid leak from injury to ethmoid bone****. You're curious at what point you've perhaps removed all of said spit-up and are now lobotomizing yourself, but you keep going anyway. Good information to file away for another time, or if you start feeling dizzy.*)

Chiyoh, even if Will is certain that in her mind she has determined the placement of Will's unmarked grave in a frequently returned-to fantasy, has made needing to ask the internet his baby rearing questions uncommon. She has a preternatural affinity with Beatrice. Beatrice in turn doesn't spit up directly into her face when being held over it, but maybe that kind of disgrace is saved exclusively for parents so no one understands when you complain having kids is actually a nightmare 50 percent of the time.

She is Mary Poppins, if Mary Poppins had an interest in the arts of survivalism and military sniping, which is very much a movie that Will would entertain seeing, but perhaps not choose to live with. Admittedly, the combination makes for an exceptional au pair arrangement for the child of a known murderer and a questionably known one. The benefit is two-fold. Chiyoh enjoys watching the baby. Will enjoys letting Chiyoh watch the baby without having to explain that he is getting dressed in a collared shirt and slacks to visit his local man-eating jailbird's trial.

Will's certain she knows anyway.

(*Even if you've been dismissed and you shouldn't be there. Nobody's going to stop you, so why should you stop yourself?*)

"Should I expect you before the dinner feed, or are you taking nights again?" she asks, eying Will's shirt. He's worn it three times now, to make the paparazzi photos less desirable he tells Anita the one time she asks, but also because he can't fathom having the energy to iron shirts for what is looking more and more like it could be three weeks of Hannibal's testimony. It also pleases him to know it annoys Hannibal on some level.

For a person who claimed to be taking the path of least resistance, Will suspects Hannibal's deliberately drawing the trial out. Will can't fathom why. It's not like he didn't murder at minimum a couple baker's dozens of people in front of eye witnesses, and pretending to suddenly have a keen interesting in shooting all the others to cover for Chiyoh, but if that's not character flaw enough for the general audience, Will supposes throwing "contrarian, labyrinthine, and pedantic" on the pile is chump change.

“I usually do,” Will shrugs, hefting Beatrice from her pillow on the couch - something touted as a “lounger” that is a glorified bean bag chair with elephants on it. Will allows it. It’s certainly a better solution than a lightly stuffed diaper box for a European heiress, but Will delights at the idea he’s going to keep her humble. God forbid she ends up thinking that she too can maraud through the streets of America eating people and telling them obscure trivia. “Can’t sleep anyway, so I might as well make myself useful.”

“If you stopped looking for ways to make it harder to sleep, you probably wouldn’t have that problem,” she quips, the corner of her mouth tight in what Will is learning to see as a smile. Her hands smell of lotion - something herbal, to cover up chapped fingers from scrubbing with hot water. Not much about Will and Chiyoh match, but their hands match. Hard work has a texture.

Beatrice throws her head against his shoulder. He catches her neck with a palm, and hopes it doesn’t scratch.

“Thank you,” he says in lieu of a retort.

She takes the baby with shy arms. “You’re welcome,” she says, and takes a moment to look him over. He wonders what she sees past the long scar of his forehead, the bags under his eyes, the general assumption of his being a violence-prone moron. “You’ll be late,” she adds unnecessarily.

(*It seems like she knows everything to you, the way Hannibal does too. She knows kisses get faster results than knives, and that wild creatures with bloody teeth still love their young in their dens as softly as prey in their warrens and fields, and that you are doomed to doing the same thing over and over again without the expectation of the different results.*)

“No,” Will says. “I’ll be just on time.”

No time for news this morning, he thinks, glancing at his laptop on the kitchen counter. No time to see what people think of Hannibal. What people think of him. No time to check the traffic, or what month he should start trying more solid foods in Beatrice’s diet. Just enough to slide into a bench seat and avoid the eyes of the people he knows, and look straight

through the heads of the people he doesn't. He caught up on bills yesterday. He ignored emails from Nigerian princes and curious colleagues. He'll go on doing more of that today, looking dour and itchy-faced with stubble that wants to come back and erase the gentle father's face he's hiding in.

He doesn't know what of this shows in his expression, only that she gives another of her inscrutable glances, swaying with the baby until she settles. But Chiyoh nods again with no further comment, and closes the door for him when he goes. With that, she closes the blinds.

It's a recent thing. She does it every day he goes, and never says exactly why other than "to discourage solicitors" or "for more restful naps", which makes him snort. Not a lot of opportunities for quiet and privacy? Even with him gone for hours, and his house absurdly out of the way for the average religious zealot? Maybe like the Witch of the West shrivels in water, Chiyoh shrivels in sunlight and must go unseen by mankind. Maybe if you guess her name, she disappears in a tiny pyre like a femme fatale Rumpelstitskin.

That aside, Will doesn't know if anyone would even know she was there - she leaves no sign of her presence, never touches the closets, or shoves the hope chest's hinged top open to make room for herself next to Beatrice's little treasures, like that's a safe place for Lecters. She doesn't even acknowledge *it exists*, nevermind using it. Stork delivered baby? No questions asked. Practical piece of furniture that should remind her of home and Will frequently references? Never heard of it, doesn't know anything about that.

Will thanks her again for babysitting, and tries to assure her that Beatrice will get better at sleeping soon enough, and not share his less gracious considerations. She's been kind to him, in the way she knows how to be. Pulling out of the driveway, Will thinks about that - if he'd be upset if she did leave. Good childcare is so hard to find, and he's starting to like her.

(*She's getting better at understanding you, not just the baby. That you are soft too behind the rough hands and words, like your daughter, and you must hide it.*)

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There's an expectation of Will when he arrives at the courthouse, as late as he can without also being obvious about it. The expectation is of course that Will shouldn't be there.

How much of that is self-consciousness about being a bad father, too obvious in his need, afraid of being misunderstood, and how much is about Freddie Lounds trying to find something to write about him is up to debate. Personally, Will doesn't know how anyone can focus on anything other than Hannibal being an absolute nightmare to question and cross examine. The district prosecutor really doesn't get paid enough.

("Well *if we're being **exact**," Hannibal explains over the prosecution, hands sensibly folded on each other, smiling at the man's phrasing like he's been looking for an opening. "I didn't technically kill him, though I'm sure not having two lobes of the right lung and one lobe of the left made it substantially harder to stay alive, certainly."*)

So Will slides in after the first recess of each day, like he's had other things to do first so that no one can accuse him of being committed to the trial despite being stricken of his usefulness as a material witness, or arguably deserving of sitting up there himself. God forbid Will show any curiosity in the fate of the man that gutted him, attempted to hull his head like an overgrown walnut, and then saw fit to gift him offspring again like all those other things were pulling Will's hair because he thinks he's cute. They probably *are* like that to Hannibal.

Will contemplates if he merits a sixth, hitherto unknown love language. They can call it *mutual existential torture*, and slide it somewhere between gift-giving and acts of service. Listening to other people, it seems like a major oversight for it to not have been previously included already, but maybe it takes an extreme case study like Hannibal to change the conventional wisdom of a book that's probably been debunked at least twice in thirty years and persisted in the canon of relationships anyway.

This thought carries him through security, and to the shiny cap of a cane. Speaking of existential mutual torture.

"Will," says Alana Bloom when he looks up, like it's her duty to announce him. Calling him out on another day of bad decision making.

"Dr. *Bloom*," Will replies as neutrally as he can, and for a brief moment has to remember to not look at her middle - too early to show if her fertility treatments are working. He contemplates just telling her to visit the nearest estuary to include storks in their numbers if they're having trouble,  and skip all the insurance claims and invasive hormonal adjustments.

It feels borderline too close to giving advice on women's health as a man who is privileged to skip all that, with only the great irony of the bird world to thank for it, so Will instead advises himself to maybe not do that.

"I hear you had a bad day yesterday," he says weakly.

Alana smiles, a weak gesture that doesn't really reach her eyes that's not meant to settle him at all. She's still beautiful, but she lacks the warmth he admired, her friendliness now made into weeds underneath a well-tended porch, wanting to flower and unable to. It's uncomfortable how Hannibal has changed her.

(*More like him, like she envies his alien detachment, his mausoleum stillness. You know she'd deny it, but it's written in every pressed seam and marble-cold platitude.*)

"I'm sure you heard it with your own ears," she says. "You were here to listen to it. Must have been validating to hear Hannibal say it out loud that he was using me as an alibi," and adds like an afterthought, "must be validating being right all the time."

"I'm wrong about a lot more than you'd think," Will replies.

"Had a bad day last week yourself for that exact reason," Alana shrugs elegantly, one hand on her brass cane. "No one talks at the witness stand without looking worse than before they spoke. You either come out an idiot or an unwitting accomplice. Jack, Chilton, you, me. Everybody goes through the wringer here. You mix one dark thing in with all the rest, and..."

"It ruins the whole load," Will finishes. He doesn't know when he started thinking about cloth diapers that need bleaching instead of crime scenes these days. He wonders if parenthood brings that on, if she'll think the same way in a few months time, if maybe she meant something else and he's making connections that he sees in his own life instead of the one they all used to share together. He wonders if they could have been friends again, children repairing the distance between them.

Alana smiles again, and this one is familiar. Not quite happy, but amused enough to make it past whatever's been built over the old facade. "Not exactly the phrasing I had in mind, but

the same in spirit."

There's shared lunches here in the pink curve of her mouth, and the casual comfort of two professionals that *will they-won't they* through the holiday parties, covered classes, the idea of that white suburban family that all the magazines advertised in the department store. This is all gone now. It belongs to Margot Verger, and some forgotten ideal Will made up in his head, but it's nice to see one more time. She looks like she might have laughed, but the longer the moment stretches between them, she grows serious the longer she stands there, watching people file into the courtroom down the hall.

"You should go home, Will," she says. "Take my congratulations on your child and your escape from the fox trap at the defendant's table...in spite of yourself. Take time to be with your baby. It's what I wish I could do," she adds, looking at the open double doors, officers at either side. "Don't let him drag you any lower than he already did. There's nothing but bad memories here."

People pass between them. They murmur into the seats, ready for another day of the show.

Will swallows around an unexpected lump in his throat.

(*They are - bad memories, today's promising to be the worst of them for you. CSI polaroids that make the rust-colored stains on Hannibal's otherwise pristine kitchen look more lewd and telling than you remember. Abigail's big pale eyes, still open to match the open column of her neck. Hannibal glib about his role in the whole thing like it's funny - all his dinner parties are perfect, and this one ended as planned like all the others even if he changed the menu just a few hours before. All you remember is being sad, that it was your fault, that you didn't understand what happened until months later.*)

"Hear they're talking about my first experience with a colostomy bag today," he jokes. "I like to think of it as a humble reminder that I was dealing with shit every day before having a kid. Can't just miss *that.*"

(*You can make new memories. You have no choice to - you're alive, and so is he, and there's a lot between you that should push you apart. There's a lot between you that brings you together. Some of those things are both, smoking wreckage that you're still staring at like you don't know what it is and how to sort it.*)

Alana frowns.

“Can’t just miss that,” she repeats, and presses rouge lips together like it hurts. The sound of her cane on the floor does too.

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“Did you bring Abigail Hobbs to your house in Baltimore with the intention to kill her?”

Obviously, the good people of the jury think. Obviously, the whole front row of big suit federal law enforcement. Obviously, Alana with her pelvis shattered into several pieces, the last person Abigail laid hands on before she used them to try and pull the arm opening her up away.

Both Will and Hannibal stare at a fixed point in the middle of the room at the flashes of white and red on a projector that’s too old for a trial as high profile as Hannibal Lecter’s, but is the only thing that the building has. Some unseen molecule is stationary and hot in the gravity between them. Neither knows what it’s made of, only that it is heavy.

(*You think she was surprised by that. She was told a different ending to the story. You don’t even know Hannibal had decided to do it until he saw that you had hurt him, and he had a fast way to return the favor.*)

Alana and Jack look at them. The press do too. They don’t look at each other.

“No,” Hannibal says flatly, in a rare moment with no affectation to his voice. Steady, because he is never not that, but without feeling, like it has been scraped away to find the good tissue beneath. “She was already in the house. I had a passport for her - I believe it was found and catalogued with my belongings in Florence, but I’m afraid I can’t speak for what the polizia would have seen fit to do with it.”

It's just paper - hardly worth recovering, save to be a keepsake. No one here thinks Hannibal had good intentions. Materially speaking, nothing ever suggests that he does, but it doesn't really matter what he did then. They understand each other now. Will's had his apology, even if it wasn't the kind you write down, or record to replay when people ask after it.

The spot between them fizzles, and disappears. Hannibal stares at the prosecutor, and Will stares at Hannibal because it's safe to do so now.

This moment is forgiven. The apology is likely between a walk around outside, and two hours of sleep that she always takes in the afternoon like the sun tires her out. Hannibal can't look at Will because for every day that Will shows up, it becomes all the more important that he doesn't, but Will knows the shape of his face and his eyes well enough to hope that his apology will share them someday.

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The adjourning of the court for the day feels a bit like walking out after an argument, even though Will hasn't said more than five words since taking his seat in the back of the courtroom.

(*The five words being "What do you fucking think?" to a particularly grating younger media passholder who asks you on the way out if today was* ***difficult*** *for you in a flimsy attempt to elicit an emotional response. As if you were going to just start crying in the middle of the proceedings, and that everyone checking out the wreckage of your abdominal core wasn't deeply embarrassing and sad. "Oh not at all! Just a bag of laughs, the last two years of my life," you could have replied, "Like the colostomy bag! It seems I have some work to do on my obliques. I would have preferred a referral to a physical therapist, but you know Hannibal - wants to do* ***everything*** *himself."*)

Will rubs at his eyes with cold fingers, the damp warm air of the harbor coming over him like a blanket. It has the same flavor of a late night at work. Dinner's flying by if it hasn't been missed, the commute home is waiting, and there's more of the same to come back to tomorrow.

He should call Chiyoh. He should call his dad. When was the last time he did that?

He doesn't, more out of habit than spite. Will is distracted from it, this time by the shuffle of feet near his, and follows the sound to the sight of comfortable sneakers, a loud acid green color that makes him frown. Above those, neatly creased black slacks, all the way up past a sensible white collared shirt and thick tortoiseshell glasses on a round face. Different from last time, he thinks. Practical, but somehow still familiar.

"Do the housewives at the country club have a vore fetish?" Will asks once recognition strikes him - the well-meaning writer moonlighting at criminal hearings. "Or just an old fashioned obsession with serial killers? I guess he cuts an enticing figure in the technicolor jackets, even if he doesn't ping the whole satanic panic trend."

The young man smiles. "A person of interest to the roving eye, even before the cheeky hor d'oeuvres."

He looks Will over. Not rudely, Will concedes, just like he's observing, as Will himself does. He wonders what kind of picture he makes in his three day old shirt, wrinkles pronounced with squinting and frowning, forehead still shiny pink where the saw tapped to be let inside. He feels old.

"You don't look quite as mad as last time," the young man says. "Just resigned."

"Not me on the stand today," Will retorts, and rolls the edge of a foot on the concrete to feel the sole drag. "Nothing to justify, and no statements of note to make to the press, unless you're fishing for that. For your *human interests*."

The young man smiles, eyes tight together until Will can't see the blackness of them. He has a nice smile, close lipped and cat-like. "Not today - got a piece in editing right now, so today's just for me. One of my colleagues gets to do the breakdowns. I'm more interested in investigative reporting."

"Don't tell Freddie," Will says with a half-smile of his own. "She'll think I'm cheating on her with you. Allegedly I still owe her one."

There's a moment that the man looks like he'd like to say something, a brewing discontent behind the pleasant expression. Will doesn't know what to make of it when he does.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry," he says.

"What for?" Will snorts. "I'll give you owing Freddie Lounds anything is terrible, but the rest...nobody really asks for a bad year. Or a bad job. They just happen."

"Well, for that, and other things I guess…you seem like a nice guy."

"Huh," Will almost laughs. "Well thank you for your condolences. You're amongst the first to offer them."

*I'm not*, he wants to scream between words. *I'm not a nice guy*.

Having normal interests and doing normal things and talking like he's normal and moral and good like all the rest of them when he can hardly manage that isn't nice - it's the bare minimum. It's how people like Garret Jacob Hobbs, and Tobias Budge, and Randall Tier, and Hannibal Lecter skate by unseen. It's why Will's not in prison *now*, when he's finally earned it, instead of when one of the other unseen monsters wanted him to be.

(*You skinned a man because you were challenged to, and when you're really honest, because you were jealous. You've chosen to forget the death of one daughter in exchange for a new one. You swallow down your resentment of being caged because you love the animal that slipped around the door of it first. You think all the time that you wish things were different, that Hannibal will jump over the railing of the courtroom divider, and you'll open the back doors and you'll both be gone before anyone recovers from their fear to do something about it.*)

(*You'd kill this person who's done nothing other than ask if you're ok if you needed to. Hands to either side of the head, a sharp twist, a heel to the curb with the neck between. How's that for a nice guy?*)

Will looks away to the streetlights - the crossing numbers are flashing, chirping to an empty street corner that it's time to go. And he should go. He shouldn't talk to people when he feels this way. He probably shouldn't even be allowed into public without something to keep him occupied. A fidget spinner probably isn't going to avert the urge to kill and dismember the youths of the journalism industry, but a dog or two could. Beatrice could.

She keeps him too busy to do much other than clean or sleep. Knowing her other superhuman bastard of a father, Hannibal could probably still manage a dismembering between diapers. Irritating, but the image makes him smile despite himself.

"What's your name, kid?" Will asks, feeling guilty between fighting a grin and the consideration of snapping this guy's neck like a toothpick. "I don't think you said before," he adds. "So I can look you up."

"If I'm lucky, you'll recognize me without," he says with a kind of nervous barking laugh. There's just the barest twitch in the man's face, a brow coming down and up. His cat's smile stays anyway. "Or unlucky I guess. Nice to stand out on our own merits, right Mr. Graham?"

"Certainly better than how many times I can be photographed in varying states of consciousness," Will shrugs, already halfway turned to leave. "Maybe one of these days I'll even get asked if I'd like to be in one."

Another bothered smile with that before they both nod, and go on their way.

Will doesn't pretend to think he'll ever look him up, but maybe he'll see him again in the future. Tomorrow. The day after that. God knows Hannibal won't be done before then.

Maybe instead at the closing statements, where he's expected. Maybe after an hour long deliberation by the jury when the prosecution and defense finally rests, because the Vergers and Byron Metcalfe have this stitched up, or because Hannibal shouldn't take long to call a verdict on. Maybe at the sentencing, or the days following where he'll be asked without words to be solemn again, out of some misplaced assumption that men shouldn't grieve losing people, even terrible ones.

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Beatrice has all of the facial definition of a lima bean. This is not her fault. If she were born under normal circumstances, Will would depend on the well-meaning staff of a maternity ward to give her a tiny bracelet with the name “Graham” on it with a birthdate and time before throwing her in with the rest of the babies, and Will would depend on that staying correct from delivery to car seat to take her home a day or two later. It just so happens he was offered a direct-to-doorstep delivery instead.

(*This scenario would also require you or Hannibal to have a uterus, cervix, and birth canal that would follow female biological standards, but you’ve not let reality get in the way of a well trodden dream yet and you don’t think you’ll start today. Nobody else is, judging from their reactions to the baby’s origin story by a fauna courier service that covers both children and furniture.*)

Will frowns into her face, which relaxes now as she sleeps. Day and night time still don’t have much meaning to her, but she’s improving, and Will has reasonably good odds that this nap will last about three hours before the pre-crack of dawn, where a nice warm bottle of something will become necessary. Will concurs with this for differing reasons, but Will can settle for a mug of tea that he’ll forget to drink instead.

She’s a pretty baby. Or at least a pretty lima bean. Will objectively thinks almost all babies are featureless and unremarkable, and that if you think you can see your Great Uncle Bill in their faces that your projection game is really very strong. Despite this, Will sees what he wants to see. Her cheeks are dimpled like his. Not plump, just dimpled. Her ears are petite and close to her head, which are not like his, thank god, or thank the storks, or thank whoever gets to decide how genetic inheritance works in these sorts of situations. Her hairs are wispy and blonde, not even the tiniest touch of brown to them. Perhaps Hannibal was one of those kids who grows up, darkening each year, golden to dirty blonde to the indescribable color that it is now.

Will kisses her head, fingers careful over the soft skin.

Will supposes Hannibal only sends pretty gifts. Even the ugly ones are pretty, once he gets past the patina of viscera that usually accompanies them and requiring an art history education to appreciate the nuance. But Beatrice is conventionally so, unmarked by his hubris, and while she will never remove the thought of Abigail, or the unwritten future of

Margot's lost pregnancy, or Hannibal himself that cannot be here, she fills the rest of the corners of Will's mind, and he can put those thoughts aside.

The sun thinks about coming up, and she eats. Will forgets about the peppermint teabag, cooling with the early morning air, and sleeps in the recliner.

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Will wakes with a start, sunlight in his eyes, and Chiyoh in front of him, trying to very delicately extricate the baby from his arms. There's a moment that he panics: *My cousin-by-trust fund is stealing the baby.*

Beatrice burbles something in delight, and Will feels his irrationality melt away to be replaced with tiredness, and a vague sense of guilt. She's here to help. She's often taken Beatrice from him to let him sleep longer.

He yawns, and instead says "Good morning" with the sour mouth of someone sleeping with it open. Chiyoh just rolls her eyes, already the picture of maternal perfection with her linen pants and breezy shirt with nothing exciting for a baby to try and chew on. She smells of gardenia, and cedar. He is still dressed in yesterday's clothes, looking like his own father did many times growing up.

May as well take advantage of a moment's peace, Will thinks, and goes in search of something to change into. Even Will can't justify showing up looking like he'd been dragged backwards through the Potomac, paparazzi or no.

But he doesn't get very far through his preparations. He gets halfway through loosening the collar when his phone starts buzzing from the counter of the bathroom, rattling like it means to escape, and the screen alight with ***Metcalfe & Associates***.

Will frowns, and pulls it up to his ear.

“Don’t come today,” Byron says bluntly, with the tone of one pressing their fingers to their eyes like they’d prefer to gouge them out but it would be an inconvenience on such short notice.

That kind of day already, Will thinks. “Should you be calling me?” he asks, one hand still working at the buttons of his shirt, now wrinkled beyond justification, but maybe only slightly worse than the never pressed travel work shirt he keeps near a duffel for last minute trips that will replace it. “Don’t you start at 8:30?”

A massive sigh. “No, I should not be calling you. I should be calling my secretary and asking her why she doesn’t think pre-opened mail is a problem, and then suing for mail tampering,” comes the reply. “Don’t come today, don’t come tomorrow. Disappear for a bit, Will. It’ll take you five minutes to find out why.”

“Is everything ok?” Will asks carefully.

“You’re trending,” he says, and just like that, he’s gone, phone call ending with a click and silence.

Will stares at himself in the mirror, head and shoulders still pinching the phone between them, and gives himself a moment to process that between the smell of Chiyoh’s shampoo from her shower and the rise in his heartbeat. The panic he pushed aside comes back, roaring with ideas.

(*Someone’s shot him. Someone’s understood there’s no justice for men like Hannibal Lecter. Someone’s sentenced him to death because they don’t know if the jury will. After that, against your better judgment, a more exciting idea: Hannibal’s escaped. Hannibal’s escaped and you won’t know until you look. Five minutes, he said. You just need five minutes.*)

Will pulls out his laptop.

And it’s neither.

“Fuck,” Will says, at first in shock. He says it three more times because it feels good, and a fourth time slower when it begins to sink in.

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All it takes is a quick look for Hannibal’s name. Will knows all the usual suspects now - the crime blogs, the local news, the flagship names that give a dutiful rundown day to day of the case details as it progresses. It’s all very dry, trying to read into Hannibal’s face when no one can read what the man doesn’t already want shown, and they’re all bad at interpreting that too.

(*Indeed, even you learn to read absences instead - Hannibal saves his tears and his thoughts for himself, or perhaps they just burn away in his eyes, and no one wants to get close enough to the caged lion, even to see if those things are there or not.*)

What he doesn’t expect to see is his own name in the summary of the front page article for the morning in *The Atlantic*. Or the note that it’s also featured in the print version, and that there’s no suggestions pointing towards a SWAT team imminently arriving on the front doorstep once more.

It’s definitely worse.

***The Sin of Inheritance***, reads the header, and beneath it:

*Hannibal Lecter and Will Graham will be a part of each other’s lives forever. The cause? Custody.*

*By Jonathan Sekine*

Most obviously - a photo, Will’s face, and his arms full of baby carrier. It’s picturesque on an early morning in downtown Baltimore in the spring, with the leaves coming out on some trees and the catkins from others. They have left these, and blurred the rare few other people

in the frame. Taken from a window perhaps, just after he's sent his car with the valet. He is signing documents this morning. He is giving Beatrice her birthright.

Second most obviously - the warped mirror to this. Hannibal freshly dropped off at the courthouse using the back entrance, cuffed from head to toe and still so very sharp in black and red.

Will reads on.

***"The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."***

***But the hand that rocks this cradle isn't a woman, as the famous poem was written to mean by William Ross Wallace, friend of Baltimore native Edgar Allen Poe and renowned Harper's journalist. Appropriate, one might think in our modern society, where fathers bear as much responsibility in raising their children. Strange, says the second shot taken of Beatrice Graham with her father in front of the law offices of Byron Metcalfe, the attorney most recently made infamous by his staunch dedication to representing everyone's favorite evil villain and de facto celebrity chef, Hannibal Lecter. The first is taken at the Federal Courthouse in Greenbelt, Maryland while giving his initial deposition against Hannibal Lecter, what should have been the last in relation to the man, and yet.***

***Together, this is hardly a story. This is a coincidence. Will Graham is in his thirties, of a respectable age for children, and hardly the first parent to be chosen as the sole guardian of their child. Much like fathers rocking their children, being a single-parent household is commonplace. Why and how he has one just in time for the trial can be explained away with the months preceding - maybe after his gutting at the hands of the good doctor makes him family-minded. Maybe he's just having a string of bad luck. (To look at the evidence of his relationship with Lecter, this is a fair assumption.) However, like many things that read as strange, something innocuous supports your gut feeling, that weird tick in your head about coincidence.***

***Something innocuous is a greeting card to the office of an attorney he would have been highly advised to not contact, and a transfer of ownership document, associated with the Lithuanian laws for the Restoration of the Rights of Ownership of Citizens to the Existing Real Property, and a matter of public record. As an issue of historical sovereignty, reclaimed nationalized properties may only be claimed by blood relatives.***

***Will Graham said "bad bookkeeping" helped him find Garret Jacob Hobbs.***

***It helped us find Hannibal Lecter's daughter with him.***

Will feels brick-heavy, and mortified. It looks dirty, written out like that, surrounded by those words. Like Beatrice is something other than the thing that calms him, and gives the gasping laughs particular to infants when he swings her up.

He skips to the next paragraph with growing dread.

***A History of Give and Take***

***Let's go back to Chandler Square, the home of Hannibal Lecter's hobbies and heart, if not his family. Here is where Will Graham will be found fifteen minutes after the paramedics are called to...***

Will leans back from the screen, holding his gut against nausea and trying not to breathe.

There's a persistent white noise buzzing in his ears, looking at the blank space between the words on the page. He stops seeing them as sentences and paragraphs. They become more akin to bright spots that keep them from forming into a coherent thought.

It's not particularly sensationalist. It's not even particularly unkind. Will has experience with the kind of draw and quarter methods that the press took to like fish to water during his own trial, and there's safety in how overblown the whole thing is. He's no man, he's a murderer in those, and everyone that is not him is pure and good.

But this is just facts.

This is just...screen scroll upon screen scroll of data, gently aligned to speculation on Will, and speculation on Hannibal, nothing actionable, but horribly right. Snapshots by phone of his baby announcement, purple envelope cheerfully blank and transparent enough to see the silhouette of the front of the card, but not the message inside. Him walking up to the courthouse like it's the gallows. The author's handwritten notes of his visit with Hannibal, drawn up on the bus ride home from the penitentiary. Hannibal would have known what he wanted if he wrote in front of him. Safer, more striking to scrawl out his impressions on the bumpy streets and stops.

The only comfort is the first picture is the only picture of Beatrice, safe at home ever since, with no one to see her save Chiyoh who wants to love her, and Margot who wants to love something like her, and too good a woman to sell her out the way she would Will and Hannibal given the incentive and the need to protect herself.

***We all watched Graham take the stand like he was the one on trial, and maybe that's how he felt. He's not guilty of the crimes the accused stands trial for, and there seems to be no cause to think that he is, even by the long list of witnesses that have been skeptical of Graham before. He is not the writer of his easy exit from cross examination, woven for him in a few quick questions, perhaps a joke on Lecter's behalf against one of the prosecutor's star witnesses, or perhaps a parting gift to a partner. We can question all day if he's being truthful, if his corroboration is imparted to the prosecution and defense prior to being awarded the estate of a very wealthy if morally bankrupt man via his child.***

***Instead, he is complicit in his acceptance of it. His face shows it.***

Will swears again, face burning.

He slams the laptop shut with the story unfinished. He closes the blinds before Chiyoh does. She's been wise enough to not show her face - it's due time Will does the same.

---

The obvious answer to Will's life trajectory at this point is depression.

Theoretically, it *has been* the trajectory since his first trip to a counselor who insisted that at age 11 that he really just needed to be in sports, which was about as helpful as a napkin against the overflow of a public bathroom. (*Whoever thought that you running cross-country was the answer to your interpersonal and emotional problems was halfway to a solution - sprinting away from things until you fall into a rhythm is valid, but perhaps a poor starting point to coping mechanisms.*) The depression has been if anything grievously overdue, and perhaps compounding interest in its delay. It would make sense that it works like that - Will's always hated finances, and hated mental health care, so why wouldn't they operate the same way?

Activity is what he needs. Something to focus on other than the sinking of his social life into the ocean, like *The Atlantic* is a stand-in for an iceberg in its waters, and he's the R.M.S Titanic, and while no one with half an eye open would describe Will as unsinkable, they would at least say that he's normally more vigilant than this. Basic self-care includes house work and not living in constant unstoppable anxiety, right?

He rigorously scrubs baby bottles, binkies, laundry that he's neglected, and laundry that doesn't need doing. He throws all of his collared shirts into a pile and makes vague threats to himself to maybe wash them. He counts the bags of dog food, and premade meals, and estimates how many weeks he can go without heading into the city proper to buy more. He checks his cash, and how much gas is in the car. He cleans the hunting rifle.

It's this that gets Chiyoh's attention, toting the baby around on her shoulder even with Beatrice out cold post meal. Will figures she's always down for an opportunity to shoot something, and maybe is expecting one the same way Will expects to fish when his father used to appear with his rods and the tacklebox at ungodly hours of the morning.

(*How your father expected you to be ready to drive to Lake Charles in January on such short notice is a mystery that lies unanswered to this day, only that you somehow always were, proving that your priorities are probably incentive based. There's every reason to suspect these days that if Hannibal showed up with knives in hand, you'd suddenly discover you had a Smith & Wesson in your shirt pocket all along and had merely been waiting for someone to get their own out first, lest you seem overeager.*)

"Cat's out of the bag," Will says, and offers no explanation other than to point the barrel away.

Chiyoh pauses, and turns her head to look past his glasses. “That you should be on the stand again, or that you should have left the country as soon as the ink dried?”

Will gives her a wan look. “I’ve always been the type to try a little bit of both at a buffet,” he says, and turns his head down to check the chamber. “I think you had the right idea, when you said that there was nothing left for you at the Lecter Castle,” he hisses lightly. “I’m beginning to think the damn thing’s cursed. Everything good in it is long gone, or here now.”

She doesn’t push him after that, only listens from the front room, making her whispered conversations with the baby, and keeping half an eye at the door. She reminds him a bit of a cat that wants to be let out now that she can’t, but she is unrelenting in her routine, save the request to catch up on the article herself, and on the trial as it progresses. Will won’t be able to tell her anymore. He can barely stand the idea of looking again.

Each passing car on the nearest road is a threat. The buzzing of the cell phone is an alarm that’s long since passed it’s usefulness, and Will itches to know what people are saying about them, but dares not listen.

---

In a development that surprises no one (*which is a nice change*), Will discovers that he is not only capable of avoiding all human contact for a week, but that he might prefer it. It helps to have a limited amount of it on the *inside* of the house, rather like a small treat for someone trying to stop eating sugar, or one allotted cigarette per day to keep from going absolutely ham on the nearest convenience store. Beatrice doesn’t talk yet, and while capable, Chiyoh generally doesn’t either, so Will opts to count it as veritable solo living anyway.

It’s hard to stay off the news sites. Chiyoh doesn’t deprive herself, but she also respects his wishes to be ignorant of it. She frowns on occasion, even succumbs to some restlessness of her own, but closes the computer neatly each time, browsers cleared and tasks accomplished.

Will knows there’s nothing good to see there for himself. He certainly never finishes the article, and that it’s better to not know how much Jonathan Sekine has perceived of him, but it does make him wonder if he’s always been so obvious. If Alana rolls her eyes, if Jack is disappointed, but expectant. Will told him he wanted to run away with Hannibal in perfect sincerity - maybe he didn’t have to say anything at all.

Sekine. That he doesn't need to look up. Society page writer with aspirations of deeper peeks into more convoluted minds. Patient with Will, because Will apparently talks when not posed as an interview.

(*Or a session, as history proves.*)

*"Figured no one caught you yet - thought I'd try my luck before you got back on your way,"* is what he'd said. Well, he certainly delivered on that. At least he was kind enough to apologize *before* the gutting. Will's alleged partner in parenting holds out on one for a solid nine months before extending one, and that guy's supposed to actually *love* him.

Will thinks Hannibal would have entertained him for an interview and thought nothing of it, already comfortable with seeing the press as a matter of personal amusement. He would poke at the young man's hesitancy as a weakness, where with Will it felt like a relatable flaw. He would have had to give a name to Hannibal to come see him, confident in the legal system's ability to keep him safe, but Will - Will's he's unsure of. Will he tries to just be an extra in the background with, with a few speaking lines to get close enough to make the frame. Smart enough to buy himself distance, no matter that he seems to think Will is a "nice guy".

Will doesn't know if he would kill him. Well, that's not true, in the heat of the moment, yes. Standing in front of him, yes, but hunting him down...plotting for years at a time? He tries the thought on for size - the intrusion of finding the card, deliberately looking for something to make waves with, seeing Will was tired and having the temerity to say so - does stalking and killing satisfy his sense of righteousness, when he has grown to live the moment as it happens?

(*There's only one person you've tried to fish up out of cold, long-burning spite, and you forgave him in the end. Is Jonathan Sekine's sin as great as Hannibal's? Does your daughter's name and your public defamation merit dreams of bloodshed? Travel across oceans and mean little knives in suit pockets waiting for opportunities to offer kind words with your mouth, and fingers that itch to sever? No. Yes.*)

(*Maybe not by yourself.*)

They keep the lights low, and Chiyoh and the baby away from the blinds. A few people get brave and tap the front door, or try to put their hands to the window to peer inside, only to receive clear and concise instruction that the house is private property, he is armed, and persisting to stay will be perceived as a threat.

He doesn't answer questions. He merely repeats himself, and considers it great practice for his upcoming move to the highlands of Peru, or perhaps the Russian Krasnoyarsk Krai which sounds exceedingly large and underpopulated by relative size. Nobody will knock on the windows there, and if they do, Will suspects they're going to have a bad time.

"Do you even know *how* to speak Russian?" Chiyoh asks.

Will can't be bothered with these kinds of technicalities. He is the father-by-preference, mother-by-technicality of the world's currently most talked about criminal, and not knowing how to talk to the three other people that live within a hundred kilometers of his theoretical property is the least of his concerns, and says as much.

No, living with a child under a year old with his enemy-turned-nanny in the Siberian frontier wasn't what Will had in mind for the last years of his thirties, but he supposes as mid-life crises go, it still sounds better than the florid affair with the serial killing cannibal. At least if Chiyoh's there, he probably runs less of a risk of eating poisonous wild legumes and dying in his abandoned bus shelter, leaving his daughter to be raised by literal wolves, so he takes some comfort in that as well.

Hannibal probably knows how to speak Russian, Will thinks with his head thrown back in the armchair, staring into the white of the ceiling while feeling for the tiny puffs of breath Beatrice makes against his neck. Her hand is clutched with an iron grip on the spit damp collar of his t-shirt. The barely there feel of four fingers and a thumb is grounding.

Will is not Hannibal. He is not a polyglot, or a professional con at heart with earnest education to cover his grift, and his eyes get cold and run watery when a breeze hits them instead of burning all signs of it away.

He strokes the back of the onesie, just beneath her head, and breathes to the ceiling in shuddering gasps.

---

Jack calls in the morning, and where all the other attempts have failed, this one Will answers.

On the fourth attempt mind you - there's a brief moment watching the name flare to life on the screen that Will wonders if he should just take the phone apart like he did the burner phone for the law firm, but there's also the consideration that he might very well be back on the menu for aiding and abetting, and it would probably be better to know in advance. It's Sunday, and he doesn't really have an excuse *not* to, with the baby upstairs with Chiyoh and all the dogs taken on their first clandestine potty break of the day already.

That doesn't necessarily mean Will makes it easier. He hesitates, lets it ring a fifth time, and answers with no greeting.

"...Will?" comes the familiar bark at the end of the prolonged silence.

"...Presumably," he says after an extra second. "Been a few days since I checked, but my identity is probably somewhat like that tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it."

"Well you're in a mood. I guess with cause," Jack replies with irritation, but lets a moment pass in wordless calm. Shoring himself up, Will thinks, for what he wants to say and like clockwork, Jack gives one of those heaving sighs that precedes a lecture. "Christ, Will, are you ok?" he asks. "Are you...not even going to try and debunk it?"

Will laughs. What good would that do? He begins to pace, the kitchen becoming a small holding pen. It's too early to drink, or maybe too late depending on how you keep a schedule. There's a sticky spot next to the sink. The dog hair is hiding just at the base of the cabinets. Anything to keep from imagining Jack Crawford's face right now.

"What do you want me to debunk?" Will asks, and feels small once the laugh has left him. "I think the exact phrasing was that it was *a matter of public record*," he stresses.

“I don’t know, that you were *paid off*,” Jack yells. “That you were *stupid* enough to be paid off for something as plebian as a secret love child.”

Will very nearly corrects him - *a secret love-hate-fuck* if they want to be technical.

“What,” he says instead, breathlessly irate, “do you want me to go on daytime television and plead my case, talk show style? Explain that tuition is expensive these days, and nobody thought to bring a condom to the arrest party in my driveway? I like the part where everyone just accepts that it’s possible for two men to *have* a love child with absolutely no ovaries involved in the entire operation, glossing over the logical inconsistencies in favor of scolding me for it happening. But you know what,” he adds, and with each word gains power again. “I guess that kind of falls in with me not being a reliable witness.”

Jack sneers. Will can’t see it, but he knows how it looks with how it sounds. “How do you figure?” he says. “Switching sides again on me?”

Will rolls his shoulders to the benefit of no one, especially his stiff neck. Of course Jack skips over the biology for the offense of Hannibal being the father. Of course. Even the goddamn news skips over this, in the biggest fuck you to science and reason and everything rational.

He continues past this, with difficulty and a wildly nasty tone. “Too *mentally compromised* to not fall in with my psychiatrist - everyone thinks it. Somebody just managed to say it without saying it. Kind of completes the picture if I get metaphorically *knocked up* too.”

The image is probably too much for Jack. Will, thinking of himself as an erstwhile expecting parent in loose fitting clothes, agrees but lets the absurdity of it buoy his spirits a little. He’s heard something about laughing at yourself being the best medicine, and Will’s in the kind of mood that could end in chugging a bottle of expired codeine.

“What do you want, Will?” asks Jack, sighing. “Now, not a year ago,” he clarifies. “Just a few months ago it was to stab Hannibal, and then it was to send the motherfucker to jail. He’s going to, by the way. They might have practically sprinted through all his bullshit surrounding the Vergers - the part of the trial that needed the most examination, and he just

claimed it was all him without a single, self-important, pontificated detail, but he's still never seeing the light of day again after closing statements."

"Shouldn't that be what both of us want, Jack?" Will pushes. "He's a nutcase. All of us said it over the last month to varying degrees. Alana, Chilton, Margot Verger, Bedelia du Maurier...how many times would you need to hear it to think it applies to the sentence?"

(*You especially, once you knew who to blame. Who would give **you** a baby other than a certifiable mad man who has no business having one either? If he hadn't had his defense team blow your legal credibility out of the water first, and the news industry blow your social one out a week later shortly after, you would have happily told anyone who listened this was the case. Maybe have some bumper stickers made, a couple of t-shirts to be worn in public for people to see before you opened your mouth and save you the explanation. "Hi! I'm Will Graham, and a wild roving moron used his big, dramatic brain to summon a bird and a genetically compatible child for me, **me**, a prior felon and general potential disaster that's believed to be an ax-murderer and a flight risk. But hey, the joy of kids, right?"*)

"Are you disappointed with that? Did you want to hire the firing squad yourself?" he adds. "Or did you want me to do it, so you'd finally know where I stand?"

There's a long pause.

"Today," Will spits out, and stands centered in the kitchen. "In case you were unclear on time."

Another one after that.

"I guess it is what it is," Jack says, crinkling over the airwaves.

"It is what it is," Will nods, and thinks how best to accept that himself.

---

They got through their Saturday like they do all the days. Chiyoh takes first feeding after 7 am and first nap while Will does first watch. They trade off during the daylight hours to accomplish small tasks that don't require going outside where any of them might be seen, while Will trolls through articles on how best to travel internationally with babies too young for standard vaccines and too young to understand that their ears hurt because of the cabin pressure, not the crushing force of existential dread.

(*Is that specific to you? Yes? Well, don't everybody line up to rub it in.*)

He throws in a search for brain bleeds while he's at it - it's good to have something else to obsess over. Will hasn't met an international flight yet that didn't make him contemplate the purpose of his life and if it wouldn't be better for the plane to crash into the Arctic Circle or something equally dire in lieu of continued angst. Signs of impending *physical* doom are preferable.

"Stir fry vegetables with teriyaki chicken, or mixed vegetables with...fiesta chicken?" she asks at some point, pulling frozen bags from the top shelf of the freezer like it has personally maligned her. After a week of eating like this, she might very well feel exactly that.

"What's the difference?" Will asks, tapping at Beatrice's back with the occasional request for *a good, strong burp* instead of vomiting again, the way you compliment dogs for stretching. Habitual.

Chiyoh is never the type to roll her eyes in reality, but sometimes Will thinks he catches the ghost of it - the teenager-never-adult that lived in the Lecter Castle. "There isn't, unless you think a small amount of cumin is a ground-breaking change to a small amount of teriyaki sauce."

Will hums.

"Are you really so determined to do nothing that you'll live eating like this?" she asks carefully, but thoroughly, like she's been thinking about it for a while. Probably since last night's soggy bagged marsala, for which Will can't blame her.

“Not really safe to go out more than we have to,” he shrugs, and congratulates the baby on a sizable belch in between. “No one can get to Hannibal, so they’re more likely to come for us. I don’t like the idea of leaving you alone, and it’s not much better for you to go out and be seen leaving here, so it’s deep cleaning the fridge for at least a little while longer.”

He thinks about that. Sage wisdom. Perfectly reasonable to eat five iterations of peas, carrots, and green beans from the safety of home. Chiyoh can’t complain - consider how much pheasant she’s eaten with potatoes and onions.

“It’s not forever,” he adds. “It’s just until the press finds something more exciting to talk about. Bigger monsters, worse disasters. They frenzy when they see what they want. We’re opting to not feed the proverbial seagulls. Maybe we’ll get lucky and the west coast will fall into the ocean this week. It’s not that they need to stop talking about Hannibal - just that they stop talking about *her*,” and nods to the infant on his shoulder.

She seems to think about that for a while too.

Chiyoh’s face is blank with that thought, working her way through dishes and straightening up the space, right up to her traditional time for bed and Will’s dedicated baby watching hours. She doesn’t say much other than good night, and where the bottles are already ready to go in the refrigerator.

She strokes the little hairs on Beatrice’s scalp before retiring for the night like she means to count them as one of her chores, smoothing each into its place. Will tries to not move Beatrice around too much in the late hours and undo Chiyoh’s work.

---

When Will wakes up, it is to the dulcet tones of a screaming baby, and the sun trying to find its way into his eyes. He absent mindedly lifts her little body from him to lay on her cushion, and finds there’s nobody to switch with him.

*Maybe she's still in the shower,* Will thinks, and heats a bottle.

But no water is running, and when he checks, there's not even the smell of one from yesterday. The soft, spicy scent from the amber bottles is gone, with the bottles, and without even looking, Will knows that Chiyoh is gone.

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It bears repeating to himself, reaffirmed with each new piece of evidence.

Chiyoh is gone.

It's grounding to think of it like big neon letters, looking at the driveway where the Volvo sits undisturbed. He's slept poorly enough since Beatrice's arrival to hallucinate things before, but there is no suitcase in the hall, no pretty scarves and linen outfits that befit an urbane lady coming down the stairs. These things are tangible, and while never particularly intrusive to begin with, they are signs of her the way that deer leave trails and break branches. All signs of her erased like she was never there.

Will's the only one that would have known it. It's not like she had a lifetime vow to stay and watch one of Hannibal's unfortunates, even if Will is arguably one, and it's not like she was there in any capacity other than an alleged general interest in being part of a family, and having the misfortune to share money with Will's child. She was always free to leave, and Will's surprised to find himself disappointed by it, no matter how short a time it's been.

Maybe the scrutiny of Will via Hannibal brings the threat of scrutiny to her too close. She's the one that actually killed many of the Verger guards. She's the one that shares a last name. She's smart enough to know when to cut bait. Or maybe she's just tired of being here, or doing things for Hannibal.

Leaving is the smart thing to do. Not safe, but smart.

Will stands on the porch for a while, watching the dogs mill around in the pink dawn of the morning. His mouth is a thin line of white lips, suppressing a shriek of exhaustion. He'd do it anyway, but then he'd just startle the pack, and the baby, and then the situation would be loud *and* deeply disappointing.

From the corner of his neck, Beatrice makes the sound that typically comes before a meltdown. "You too, huh?" Will asks her, and doesn't try to cover up the thickness in his throat. He bounces her a couple times to stave off the worst of the incoming frustration on her face, only recognizable by the creasing of her mouth and her eyes in ominous exaggeration.

Today he is alone. Probably tomorrow and the days following that as well. It is Monday, and perhaps the first day of Hannibal Lecter's jury deliberations, which may be short, brutal, and possibly worse in outcome than the substantial influence the Verger Estate has poured into it, something even immaculate planners like Byron Metcalfe and his devil-smart client cannot plan for. Loyalty is in short supply. Human irrationality is abundant. The kind of thing that angers people enough to want more than the justice of prison, or make them leave because the seams are coming apart and they never had a reason to try and stop it from happening. All this, and Will cannot watch it unfold.

Extra time to take showers is now in short supply too, Will thinks as a final kick to himself, catching a whiff of himself and the persistent nagging stink of formula, and considering how best to restructure the day.

It's fine, he's fine, he's done this before. He bounces Beatrice again, fiddling with her clothes to find the pacifier clipped there, dog head smiling out at him. A vague hysteria is bubbling up with it, no matter that his hand is steady when he offers it to her.

"How do *you* feel about Russia?" he asks her.  Thankfully, she doesn't cry.

# accidentally on purpose

Victimhood doesn't suit Will. Whether this is because people either think he's not eligible for it as a person of frequently questionable character, or people assume that he is a perennially helpless person (*which you hate*), the result is the same. Will pushes forward to the next thing as soon as he is allowed.

He does allow himself to wallow a little bit this time though.

Chiyoh doesn't call, but she doesn't shoot him either, so that's progress. Feral countryside nannies are fickle and unpredictable things, and Will's not willing to take his chances that she hasn't decided to assassinate him after all. It takes about six hours of morose moping in the armchair, waiting for one of these events to occur, before Will has the energy to concede that he's back to square one, albeit with more experience than the first time he finds himself in the unenviable position of parenting solo.

He knows he can brew coffee while heating bottles.

He knows he can sleep in sequence with Beatrice.

The laundry will eventually get taken care of - this he doesn't really know, but somehow seems to happen anyway.

The baby loves and needs him, and whatever she requires, she will get. Likely through generous use of the internet, and more unsolicited advice from random people who can't be seem to keep their mouth shut at first sight of a slightly askew bib. Were he here, Will has no doubt Hannibal would have more of the same to offer and some wardrobe criticism as well, like Will hasn't been handling this whole bizarre scenario like a pro... If that pro was sprinting, naked, while on fire, over the finish line.

If push comes to shove, he is overdue for the quinquennial Graham father-and-son fishing trip, of which the father half of that can likely be bribed to utilize his night owl hours to watch infomercials with Beatrice for a week or two…once the media is bored shaking Will's proverbial dead body like a dog with a squeak toy. It's not like getting lectured about being careful where he sticks the business end of his manly tackle if he doesn't want kids is new to him, if perhaps no longer useful, or relevant to storks. It would, nonetheless, be the first thing out of the elder Graham's mouth upon introductions to his granddaughter. He's bound to have some knowledge to impart. Will's still alive, isn't he? That speaks to *some* aptitude.

(*You'd still prefer Hannibal - unsolicited advice, tendency to subvert you and all.*)

"Alright, busy bee," he says, turning Beatrice from a slouching position at the crook of his arm to look him in the face, pink faced and smiling like existence is a cosmic joke. To those under the age of six months and incapable of understanding object permanence, perhaps it is. "Where to?"

He places a noisy kiss on her cheek, and she kicks her feet in excitement. If he's going to empathize with something, it may as well be that.

---

In fairly short order, Will learns a number of things. This is great - Will has always had an appetite for information, from applicable to the completely useless kind.

His life as a profiler has benefited greatly from his inexplicable familiarity with things outside his purview. Arguably, it is his greatest strength, just behind the emotional resonance that his "disorder" affords him - a vivid imagination he tells people, syncing up those bits and pieces that have no usefulness from a singular point of view, but their entirety speak truth to people's lives, and gather in the corners of his mind until he needs to open the drawers looking for them again.

Will's not a doctor, but he has a wealth of knowledge of cut and blunt force injuries, as well as terminal illness symptoms; no good misjudging a death as foul play if someone died by their body's own design. Will's not a therapist, but he sees minor tics and terminal bad habits instead of signs of guilt, and recognizes things he's looked for in himself after decades of wondering when he'd have a name for what he is other than empathetic. Will's not a

contractor, but he knows what grade of nails and screws have been shot into the victim's hands, and the type of compressor gun needed to apply that sort of force. Will's not a huntsman, but he knows the season for each kind of prey, and the gauge and shot best suited to them.

(*You are certainly not a butcher of animals, even if you are a guiltily aspiring butcher of men, and after months in the house of a consummate gourmand, you persist in knowing very little about their anatomy, or else surely you'd have recognized Hannibal's idea of a lamb rib is inconsistent in width with a human one. During your final supper together, you had assumed you had a person in your mouth, another black communion pressed on your tongue - why stop at this meal when all the others revelled in their sins? Turns out Hannibal was quite literal in his offerings - the meat of some other animal's tender child, in exchange for your honesty.*)

(*You guess you know now.*)

Not all of this knowledge is inherently sad. For example, he's not an ornithologist, but Will knows there's pretty much zero chance that a black stork would appear in North America for any reason other than complicating his life, and the power-to-weight ratio for carrying a human newborn while in flight is outside the capability of most all birds in the *ciconiidae* family. He's not winning any arguments with himself and others with that little tidbit, but he knows it the way you know there's a splinter in your foot that can't be seen, so that's just going to have to satisfy him. Will's not a woman, but he has an absolutely inordinate amount of data on breastfeeding versus formula feeding, and the fact that if he was *really* interested, he could technically do either...but the formula's working out fine, and he's never really wanted to entertain that becoming a kink anyway, no matter the surplus offered when looking up the mechanics of male lactation.

This is just the fun stuff. A lot of the things that Will learns in the week that follows Chiyoh's absence aren't exactly fun, but still useful. Most importantly, they don't involve any more bite sized quotes or essay length features of his personal life and his unenviable taste in breeding partners.

Will learns on Tuesday that there is absolutely no rule that says you can't frivolously buy multiple plane tickets. Not only can you frivolously buy plane tickets, you can choose to *not use them* even after you've checked in, like some sort of sociopath intent on making multiple flights late for their next destination. Will would like to say this isn't some sort of revelation for him, but as the child of a blue collar man, and not inclined to travel regardless, it is.

“So you’re saying I can get two seats to Frankfurt, two seats to Edinburgh, and another two seats to Manila with the same departure time,” Will says, phone pressed to the side of his face, after a regrettable amount of time listening to a waiting music jingle that sounds like it came out the other side of a garbage disposal, “and the only penalties are that I can technically only board one plane, that a baby crying will get me some dirty looks, and the TSA might flag me but probably won’t in favor of randomly checking and poorly closing shampoo bottles and human ashes?”

Will could probably leave out the criticisms about the bag checks, he thinks, but the hour of being on hold leaves him in a mood.

“Of course,” says the agent on the other end, warbling cheerfully from what is probably a call center near none of these places, and blessedly free of the elevator jazz and 80s pop hits played in no particular order that could have been transmitted from a numbers station judging by the sound quality.

“Please bear in mind you would still be responsible for the fare of all the seats, and still responsible for fulfilling all of the customs and visa documentation for each,” she drones on, unseen smile in her voice, “also that the airline reserves the right to sell the seat to another customer without refunds for the prior purchase.”

Will waves a hand in front of himself, knowing full well that she can’t see it anymore than he can see her expression, and that he wishes the conversation would move onwards regardless.

“But I’m saying it’s not going to cause homeland security to hold me at the gate? I can just be an indecisive asshole with too much money and no executive decision making up to whatever the check-in cutoff is?”

“Oh, no sir, but can I perhaps help suggest some specials that might make the choice easier?”

(*At last, you think in a deadpan that only you can hear or appreciate. A* ***special*** *- surely that will make deciding how best to flee the country more clear.*)

Will buys all of them to put her customer service theory to a test, with no actual actionable plan to use them. It's the least Hannibal can pay for, even if the shiny and surprisingly heavy black card has Will's name on it, a line of credit opened courtesy of one of Beatrice's many and generous inheritances. He tries to shirk off the frivolity of it, flex this new muscle like the asshole with too much money that he calls himself, but it still feels like it should sting, watching charges accumulate that have no actual value other than to make him feel like he's doing something. His fists are tight and his wallet heavy and hot, watching the receipts come in.

He hopes Beatrice never learns to feel the same, this shame to have wealth. Then again, he hopes she learns to respect that she'll never have to.

On Wednesday, Will learns that much like with the plane tickets, money greases a lot of wheels, this time greasing the wheels of long term care for seven dogs. It's not something that he wants to do, but should. Watching Winston nose at his daughter from her cushion on the bed, carefully pressing the black wetness there to her cheeks like a blessing, the guilt is immeasurable.

"Oh, we'd love to keep them!" says the owner of a horse ranch that he is friendly with by merit of needing someone to watch them in the past, and amongst the first people he contacted in the past before going to Italy and Lithuania and to hang like a dry-aged salami at the Verger Property. They know the dogs, and the dogs know them, and the well-tended kennel full of purebreds and rescues alike can handle another handful or two, even if it is for a long time.

"Not forever," he tells the rancher, and himself, pacing between the chimney and the edge of the mattress, scratching at the regrowing scruff on his face. Just like last time, Will assures himself, when he thought he might not come back, but couldn't think of what the future looked like if he didn't. "Just until things calm down."

Will suspects the check for close to $200,000 is what really bridges what is rightful hesitation and previous friendliness, but is too relieved to know the dogs have somewhere to go if (*when*) they go. He uses the federal travel food stipend as a guideline for each; that *feels* like the approximate daily budget for a low maintenance canine. God knows it never came anywhere near Hannibal's standards, though even if it did, Will thinks he'd still have ended up with lung sausage as a first meal together on principle.

Much like Will didn't ask about the sausage, the rancher doesn't ask where the money comes from. It's stupid for either of them to pretend they don't already know.

"Probably better that you're gone anyway, considering…" they say, and both Will and the owner know exactly what it's considering. "*Ah*," they cough over the phone to cover their awkwardness. "Well. How's the baby? When did you bring her home?" and Will tries not to resent them for their curiosity, and tells them it's all fine, she was kindly brought by the stork after a night of heavy drinking and poor family planning, like every other unlooked for blessing.

"How wonderful," they say in that dreamy tone that follows such pronouncements, and Will sighs.

He keeps the dogs for the rest of the day anyway, Buster stretching out along the side of Will's leg on the bed, Harley at attention next to Beatrice, with all the rest nervous but happy to be near each other until the next opportunity to go outside comes. He feels like a traitor, despite knowing it's for the best. He guesses that's part of feeling like a father...mother...whichever he is, if that's something that ever mattered.

It grieves him to watch them go the following day, excited to be outside and on an adventure, but confused why he's not going with them. It's not really an option, but the urge to ask if he'll fit in the back with the baby carrier is almost too strong to ignore. He waves Beatrice's hand at them for her, desperate for something to do with his own, and now it is only them - just two.

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On Friday night, Will learns Hannibal Lecter is declared legally insane, and sentenced to 26 consecutive life sentences to be served in a state mental institution.

He looks because Anita tells him to. He looks because once he knows it's done, he needs to see it spelled out, like it's the reality check he's been sitting and waiting to pay the tab on for what seems to be forever.

An additional 18 years is tacked on for three counts of proven medical malpractice, and 5 years for falsifying documents, which feels remarkably like being charged for scratching the paint on a rental car after crashing it directly into oncoming traffic, but Will supposes was to be expected. This also effectively rounds out the prior sentenced 650 years into a displeasingly prime 673 years, which annoys him for reasons he can't quite describe without sounding crazy himself. It will make a fun note in a history book someday - a pub trivia night question if he's ever heard one.

When asked if he had anything he wanted to say at sentencing, Hannibal is reported to laugh and comment on the industriousness of the prosecution.

"I look forward to many more years of fond memories," Hannibal says in perfect pleasantness, devilish in his black suit with gold embroidered lapels and looking ready for a party in Milan rather than the mildew laden basement he had been so kind to stick Will in for the better part of the winter holidays just a little more than a year past.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow, but there's always the state and civil suits to bring us back together," he tacks on like a man of completely sound mind and smugness for someone about to potentially wear orange for a timeframe equal to the next appearance of the Great Comet of 1882.

They let the victim's families make impact statements to close the circus with the gravity that justice demands, paragraphs full of names and little tragedies unfolding to a man who hears them as God must hear complaints and prayers - too other to be understood as being evil, or simply ambivalent to suffering.

Will isn't embarrassed to admit he doesn't read them, and instead reads *Pat the Bunny* for what ironically feels like the 673rd time in the late hours of the night. It's not quite the same punishment, but with no outlet for what he is experiencing other than to do *something*, it feels like one.

***Now YOU look in the mirror***, it says, reflective paper glinting darkly upwards, sticky with fingerprints from spit-wet fingers that are too small to turn the pages herself.

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Everyone seems to want a comment the weekend after, no matter that Will locks his house down like a consulate office in a siege.

(*Poorly, few exits, generally more of a pinky swear to not have people just bust the windows open and ruin the day, but you count on your now exorbitant amount of litigation money to keep them from testing that metaphorical comparison.*)

He guesses there are no better things to do with a Saturday, and no days of rest on Sunday in the press corps. They rattle the door handle, they honk car horns, they generally make a menace of themselves up to the sound of a pump action rifle, that Will has been very inclined to try out after cleaning it. No one is bold enough to try the windows, where Will can see them. Chiyoh wasn't the only one with firearms experience, even if it does take him a whole ammo magazine to down someone.

Eventually, Will puts out a simple sign written in the skidding cadence of half-dried permanent marker, reading "***Ringing the doorbell will be construed as an act of violence, and responded to accordingly***."

This puts a stop to most of it.

What it doesn't put a stop to is Freddie Lounds, who is going to bookend her articles on Hannibal, Will, and her involvement if it's the last thing she does on earth. She says so via text. Will deletes it out of habit. With no day job to worry about Monday morning, she's perfectly content to wander up to the front of the house in the golden evening light like she owns the place and the signs aren't meant for her too.

Freddie, unlike the average man, has no natural fear of consequence, or Will for that matter, which is ironic for a person who spends so much time insisting that he's a danger to society and himself. From the first article calling him a mad dog, to Will dragging her out of her car like they're going to have a schoolyard scrap in the driveway over the remains of Randall Tier, she is unbearably persistent. Even while screaming, Will thinks with a groan, which seems like more of a habit and less of an actual response to the fraughtness of her situation when they began planning the entrapment scheme.

Will thinks maybe she doesn't buy her own story, or thinks the obviousness of Will being the one to kill her acts as some sort of invisible barrier to him trying it. The irony of this is made especially rich by being the first person to probably figure Will out, just behind Hannibal, who shouldn't count anyways as some sort of statistical anomaly that doesn't operate by any rules.

Her ringing the doorbell is less of a ring, and more of a constant hum that drives Will from dozing on the armchair, baby in lap, to standing straight up, baby in ear, screaming. The dogs would have barked if they were here, ready if somewhat incapable of doing anything meaningful to help.

Will finds that he misses them, for another uncountable number of times.

"I know you're in there, Graham!" Freddie yells through the door, scolding him as though they're roommates, and he is holding the bathroom hostage instead of avoiding all signs of human life.

"Your car's behind the house and you've got mail in the box. Any good 'With Sympathies' cards yet? I hear bereavement is a hard one for spouses," she hisses through the door frame.

Will counts to ten, shushes Beatrice's tears wetting the edge of his shirt, and clears his throat while leaning against the door. He should ignore her and just make dinner. He should follow up on his threat to fill people with scatter shot for ignoring the sacrosanct hours of the baby sleeping.

Will eyes the rifle, but ultimately leaves it leaning against the wall.

(*Don't any of them understand she might just decide to not to again for the rest of the day, and blame you? All these blissfully kid-free people, just waltzing up like loud noise isn't verboten, and then calling* ***you*** *the villain when you consider vigilante justice in response. The nerve.*)

"No one's dead, and we're not married," he says in a voice just loud enough to be heard through the door. "We're not even on the birth certificate together if you really need

something to write about, but I think your crime enthusiast colleague beat you to it. Major oversight by the county recorder, but expected when submitted by literal bird brains."

There's a moment of quiet - Will takes this for the mystic amnesia that all mentions of the stork bring. Apparently that's still working. But Freddie does so hate to be the last one to hear something, and Jonathan Sekine was *so* much better at finding things to hear, so annoyance must account for some of it.

"You realize someone's tagged your door, right?" she asks in turn, prepared to annoy him in turn. "Really nice, just a big skull in the middle with a 'fuck you' to drive things home."

"How do you know that wasn't me?"

"It's drawn too inaccurately. The eye socket placement is terrible."

"Maybe that's the point. Maybe being stabbed and shot as many times as I have has left me with a tremor and a poor sense of judgment."

"Well that's true, but that's been true long before getting stabbed."

Will snorts. It would be nice if someone would take the high road and not say it for once. "Everyone's a critic, aren't they, Bea?" he sighs into the side of the baby's head, her crying losing speed and intensity until it sounds more habitual than honest, dramatic to the end. Like father, like daughter, Will smiles to himself.

Will pulls his head back up to rest on the door. Sunshine finds the cracks in the blinds, casting sleepy late yellow stripes on them. It would be nice to lie back down and forget. It would be nice to lay down together, him, Bea...he doesn't know what it's like to just lay still with Hannibal. He thinks it would be warm, like a blanket, or heat from concrete on summer nights.

He closes his eyes to it, and watches the lines in blue beneath his eyelids, burned there.

“There’s nothing to say,” he says to the room, close to the frame where Freddie might best hear him. She won’t leave without something. “It went exactly as the prosecution hoped it would, with maybe four less counts of murder than anticipated, and one less witness than they wanted. Didn’t plan that. Don’t think I’d waste my time being there if it was. If you’re expecting something else, I don’t know what to tell you,” he says, sore shoulder pressed to the wood.

“There’s nothing left about me to talk about that you or everyone else hasn’t already covered,” he sighs, “and the baby’s too young to have done anything of note.”

Beatrice finds her voice again with Will’s raised near her - a properly offended yowling thing, tempestuous. If Freddie says anything from the other side, he can’t hear it, and he doesn’t really try to.

“Go away, Freddie,” Will repeats, leaning against the door with the baby squalling between. “I don’t have anything left to say.”

And for that day, thankfully she does.

Two steps back, another pause, and three steps down the porch until all that’s to be heard is gravel crunching underfoot, and Beatrice setting the tone for a rough evening. Just like the first week. Will breathes in and out, and wonders if he should have just torn the doorbell off the wall. He wonders if he shouldn’t use the first available ticket he can find to somewhere other than here, instead of the ones he’s wasted in a near but distant future already, more of a fantasy paid for with imaginary money he didn’t earn, less of a real plan that he knows what he’s doing.

He imagines summers in softer places, and works carefully to mix formula, and speak in a tone that brings Beatrice with him there.

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Will dreams of the white and black wings of birds in the tall trees in front of his house, gleaming gold and molten in the sunset.

They bring nothing this time thankfully, only spread their feathers lazily above the leaves, long necks of their bodies stretching into sharp faces. They have made a wheel out of the top of one beechwood to rest their legs. The way they talk sounds like the rattling of bone, a song of eaten things clamoring together, tapping a rhythm to each other as cicadas and crickets do unseen.

Will watches them from the porch, barefoot and tender mouthed, unable to walk down the drive to get a closer look and no voice to call to them.

He thinks that they are happy.

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Will opens the door for exactly one visitor, on the following Monday once he's certain everyone has accepted that he has no tragic epithets to add. His curiosity demands it. It's the only person that Will doesn't understand in the aftermath.

It also feels a little unfair that Will gets sent to Muskrat Farm to get his face carved off, baby trapped, and is doing his best impersonation of a mountain dwelling hermit in otherwise flat Virginia, whereas Bedelia gets a first class flight back to the United States, to give testimony as a free witness, and cruises around in an Aston Martin like she owns the place.

Two types of people, Will thinks, watching her glide to a smooth stop, car turning a little circle to point back out towards the road. To leave more quickly, comes the thought, and Will very nearly smiles at her caution.

His suitcases sit open on the floor, empty save for the inclusion of a comfortable sweater and a yellow stuffed animal in the shape of what is guessed to be a fox, or perhaps a very messed up weasel, but is a naptime favorite that reason dictates should cross international borders if occasion calls for a swift retreat. Between them, the hope chest sits, proud and open and ready to scratch the floor again when Will needs to move it back out of the way, all of its

contents scattered in piles to be refolded or removed. He's already stubbed his toe on it twice.

Behind that, waving her arms like an enthusiastic if poorly coordinated octopus, Beatrice oversees his lack of progress as a tiny middle management - poorly, with loud interjections that don't mean much.

Will admits it was probably unrealistic to be able to completely disappear without at least one last unsolicited intrusion, he thinks with a glance out the blinds, but one hopes. That it's going to be *Bedelia* feels a little bit like a knife twist.

The silhouette of Bedelia walking up to the porch is suspicious at first, her heels neatly clicking and airy silk scarf covering her neck in a shroud of black, but when no patrol cars come rumbling in behind her, and no Verger thugs follow like it's a hit in the Italian apartment once more instead of a friendly visit, Will allows himself to think what she could possibly want. The trial is over, so she can't be looking for corroborators, and Will was hardly conscious enough to recognize her intentions in Florence between gunshot wounds and muscle relaxers. He's heard she was found largely the same, sans the gunshot wound.

(*You distrust the smell of that story.*)

Bedelia, Mrs. Lydia Fell, the pristine foil to Hannibal's disguise. He's not had time to really process that, even if there's been time to touch the edges - that he was discarded, and replaced. That there are other people in his life at all that have known Hannibal longer than Will.

It had hurt the first time he heard about it, still half full of surgical drains, his stomach a hard rock of swelling, dread, and stitches. *He's gone with her*, they told him, and the parts of him that aren't sick with anger are made green with envy instead, and he must stare at the white ceiling of his room and do nothing. They are playing house while he is trapped in a bed that cannot be bent for fear of rupturing his abdominal wall. They are sipping champagne and strolling the palazzo while he's still eating clear fluids.

Baltimore is no Florence, but perhaps Bedelia must look at him from a high place once more. It's habitual by now. First in prison, second in First Class, and now untouchably from the pedestal of victimhood. Everything has neatly slid into place for her, while he is still gluing

the parts of his own life back together. Influence, book deals, sympathy, things that Will would have had in some other world are hers to do whatever she wants with.

(*You hate her for that. Her ease. Her red-soled shoes that can stride over your wreckage.*)

She taps the door twice, but is respectful - she doesn't try the doorbell, or the handle, like someone familiar with how open he used to keep the house, letting the dogs in and out and never afraid of someone he couldn't handle walking in. She certainly doesn't say his name. He hates her for that too.

Will opens the door anyway. Bedelia seems surprised that he does.

"Doctor du Maurier," he says, and tests how that feels. He scratches at the side of his face for want of something to do with his hands.

"I saw the sign," she says with a featureless look, placid as a winter lake when the door pulls back, but half turned like she means to leave. She takes in Will;s appearance, standing in the common dishabille of the early days of Beatrice's arrival: t-shirt, cardigan, comfortable sweat pants, the triumphant return of a patchy beard, the wild hair of a person who's not been very concerned with appearances, or combs, or figuring out the last place the comb was seen.

(*Chiyoh told you where that was sometimes, you think. It always seemed to find it's way back to the counter, even if it wasn't you that put it there. There's a lot of things in the house like that now, lost and waiting for someone more aware than you to put them back to rights. You try to pile things that matter into the wooden chest, next to embroidery, and tiny shoes, accessible from its home in the middle of the room while you sort out what stays and goes in your life. Everything that you want is* ***there***.)

"It's hard to miss," he replies.

"Perhaps you're not ready to receive guests," she says smoothly, pushing hair from her face that was never in it to begin with.

Will tries a tight half-smile on for size. “This is about as ready as anyone gets from me these days,” he says. “Now is fine, if you want to be received, though I don’t know what I can do for you.”

Bedelia doesn’t return the smile, but she’s not exactly the kind to do so, stepping into the half-dark of the living room like she thinks it will bite if she moves too quick.

“You made quite the impression,” she says, one hand clutching a small purse, the other working at the clasp. “Surprising to what extent, but then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. Experience dictates Hannibal wouldn’t fixate on anything that wasn’t remarkable in some way.”

“People love something to gawk at,” Will says dryly, hands in the pockets of his sweatpants, walking over to the baby. She’s content this morning, watching from next to the bags and dozing between the sounds of bags shuffling on the floor, and Will pacing from one side of the room to the other, looking at what they own, and what he loves well enough to take with them. It’s not a lot so far - not much more than what a baby a couple of months old needs. It must be nice to be so young to not understand losing or keeping things.

“Is that what you think I’m here to do?” she asks, eying Beatrice on the floor around the edge of the chest. She looks at her with the kind of solemnity typically given to the delivery of bad news, or perhaps visiting Antietam. It should be awkward with the furniture in the way, if she can actually see Beatrice at all, but she stares on, seemingly unbothered by that.

“You’re here to see something,” Will shrugs, and pulls the baby’s socks back into position with careful fingers. He receives a well-blown spit stream for his efforts, and wipes it away with the hem of his cardigan without much thought. “You usually are.”

“I’m here to understand your gift,” she says.

“Not in the market for a psychiatrist,” Will says with a huff, pushing up from his knees to stand. “Terrible luck with those.”

This amuses Bedelia where nothing else has. “While Hannibal was obsessed, and Doctors Bloom and Chilton had a great deal to say about you, I’m afraid it’s not you that I’m here to see,” Bedelia says in turn, and gestures smoothly to the cushion on the floor. Beatrice kicks her legs irritably, and squawks when she sees it, little eyes peering out. “I mean your most recent acquisition. Hannibal’s *gloriosa donna*.”

Something inside Will tightens at this that he has to swallow away. Fear, he supposes. A creeping sense of ineptitude.

He doesn’t really know Bedelia, but he does see hesitation in her face, a different brand of fear than the one he’s feeling. He watches her stand with her black heels in front of the elephant print, the waving fists, the occasional little gasping protest that settles with a soft toy in hand. A safe three feet between her and Beatrice made by the wood of the hope chest, manicured hands held near to her own body, and not the slightest move to come any closer than that.

Glossy, dry-cleaned, coiffed, passive Bedelia du Maurier doesn’t know what to do with a baby.

(*But you do, comes the curling warm thought, in the voice in your head that doesn't sound like you anymore.*)

Bedelia stares down, and Will stares at her hands, tight on the purse.

Carabosse come to bestow her curse to Sleeping Beauty, uninvited, Will thinks ungraciously. Her face is soft though, thoughtful. She takes measured looks at the splotchy front of Beatrice’s onesie, hair mussed at the back, two buttons misaligned but close enough together to not merit a tantrum from the pinch of tight clothes. The baby is as messy as Will, and the house, and he thinks he can see him in her there where he can’t in her small round face.

Bedelia shifts her feet, close enough to the chest to touch, but never sitting. She seems unaware of it between her and Beatrice at all.

“He drank white wine in the evenings in Italy,” she says, just when Will thinks maybe she won’t speak and is just here to ghoulishly stand in the house to annoy Will.

She continues. “Red meat at most meals. The university during the day, the galas and festivals at the base of the campanile at night. Danced, dallied, whatever took his fancy. Selfish, revelatory...a bachelor’s return to old habits after a breakup,” she drawls and looks at Will.

“And you there with him,” Will says tonelessly. He doesn’t meet her eyes.

Bedelia waits a moment, before turning back to Beatrice, an elegant tilt of recognition towards him. “The person best suited for his life before you, and the rebound after it, I suppose.”

“He respects you,” Will says, and tries to hide the envy he feels creeping up at that admission. “Enough to seek you out, and enough to leave you standing at the end, which is more than most people get. Heard he fully corroborated your coercion story - well done, by the way.”

She smiles out of habit. “Etiquette aside, Hannibal can be a consummate gentleman when it benefits him,” she says. “He wouldn’t be going to a mental institution if he wasn’t. He’d be on a short list for execution.”

Will snorts, and pretends that it doesn't make him sick to imagine. “I guess perjury is gentlemanly these days,” he says, deflecting.

“Does it frustrate you that he lies so readily for other people?” she asks, adjusting the sleeves of her blouse. “He did it for you, multiple times in court, long before this year to the FBI, and in sessions with me before that, but you don’t seem to want to count that. You seem to want to not share anything from him with others...you have that in common.”

“What can I say,” Will says, “I guess we have selfishness in common too.”

“Amongst other things.”

Will bends down to a pile of blankets, mouth tight. The embroidery of the white cloth that brings Beatrice and her little fist in the mouth of the cursed black bird sits there like a little truce flag. “A child is probably the most ridiculous of all those things,” he grumbles.

“Hannibal is nothing if not obliging of ridiculous requests.”

“You may not believe me, but I asked for something impossible, almost cruel,” he says, shaking the cloth free of wrinkles, irritated. *Fix everything that happened,* like that was something either of them could conceive to be erased, knowing that it wasn’t. How Hannibal must have despaired between hot presses of lips to chilled skin in a cold room, and Will shaking with dread of the moment’s end.

“I didn’t ask for a baby,” he says, like that explains everything, and it will have to, because technically he didn’t.

Bedelia nods, but grows impatient, speaking slower now. “Nonetheless,” she says, “no matter what you asked for, I find it curious. It’s something he’d give to no one else - his lifetime of indulgence and self-importance, humbled by something as pedestrian as prison, or having a baby when he’s so happily killed other people’s grown ones. All because of some...sad man, with one foot on either side of a moral fence,” she says.

And here Will sees it - the flash of her own green envy, watching from the high place, never able to take part.

“I almost didn’t believe it when I heard, but here the two of you are...my congratulations, or my condolences if you prefer,” she says quietly, and turns towards the door like she means to leave. “I’m sure near to 700 years in a cell is hilarious to Hannibal in concept, but to you living on the outside, it is akin to death.”

Will is surprised to hear she sounds honestly sorry. She could be - she dodged a proverbial bullet, if bullets are Hannibal's fixated and unfailing attention. When her sigh of relief to be missed passes, there’s still the body next to her, gasping. Will took it instead.

She slowly walks away. *Click, click, click,* her heels go on dusty wood, avoiding things strewn across the floor. Will shakes the sound away - her shoes, the idea of his gasping, gut hurting again.

“Is that it, then?" he asks. “Curiosity satisfied? Five minutes to understand everything? You must have been quite the scholar,” he adds nastily.

Bedelia straightens her back, and turns towards him once more, away from the door. She pauses, white and gold in the open doorway.

“At the end of the Divine Comedy,” Bedelia starts, “Dante tries to perceive God, something beyond the strength of man, and Dante looks on, limited by what he is but full of conviction to try. He finds peace in an imagined vision of the human form, and the saints within it, Dante’s Beatrice most important amongst them.”

“That,” Bedelia says with a point of her fingers, baby starting to sleep again in the warm morning air, a mess of blankets and bottles, and motes of dust dancing in the unfiltered light from the door, “in name and in creation, is Hannibal’s impossible and foolish answer to your wish, whatever it was. Your gift.”

She looks him in the eye, face somewhere between sneering and soft. “Is that not everything I needed to understand?”

Will’s face softens, heart squeezing in his chest. He supposes it is.

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She leaves, because she doesn’t want to stay, and Will doesn’t want to offer. He can respect her emotional distance from motherhood. It’s not the kind of thing that she wants to think about anymore than she wants to think she didn’t merit being asked if she wanted it. Holding the baby would be unwanted, feeding her a mess that Bedelia du Maurier has long since decided wasn’t for her, and Will’s got work to do regardless - he has open ended travel plans

that will bear no fruit if there are no diapers to be worn or replacement shirts to be dirtied in equal volume.

Will insists on her emotional distance from him. And physical, if she can oblige. However, he does have one question that needs answering. After all, Bedelia understands Hannibal better than anyone. He said so himself. She's probably thought so at least once, before today.

"Doctor du Maurier," Will shouts from the stoop of the porch, one foot between the screen and the doorway.

She turns, car door open, and waits.

Will clears his throat with growing preemptive embarrassment.

"Are there allegories to birds in the Divine Comedy?" he asks. "Like, some sort of context I wouldn't remember from high school? Maybe something decidedly obscure and Florentine and not immediately obvious in a sleep-deprived scroll through of the content? Likely stork adjacent?"

Will watches her process the question, inscrutable stillness of her face going from smooth to wrinkled in confusion. She doesn't transform into the peaceful grace most settle into when this subject comes up, but he supposes he also didn't specify, so it doesn't count. Will's given up pretending he understands how that works.

"What?" she replies like he's the idiot, and she didn't just stare at a baby with the corner of a solid hunk of wood in the way for several minutes.

He probably is one, but it's worth it for the expression on her face.

"Nevermind," he says with a frown, and waves her off.

(*Maybe someday Hannibal will tell you, as he promised. He keeps those to you now, though not often in the shape that you imagine them to be.*)

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Will stubs his toe again rushing back inside, in what is becoming an almost ritualistic lack of awareness of his space, cursing the superior carpentry that only he seems to be subject to running into. He apologizes to Beatrice who has begun to fuss loudly in his absence, but only the chatty kind of fussing - with the development of her vision has come a development of her intolerance to being alone in a room for more than a minute or two, making her the first actual extrovert in the Graham line, probably in the entirety of history.

With their guest gone, they must finish their work - go bags don't make themselves. He asks her if she prefers the blue spit up cloths over the pink. He presses the sparkling glitter shoes into the corner of the chest and tries to picture places she can wear them. He wonders if the Maryland justice system allows family visits to serial killing sociopaths that dream big things that come to life against logic and sense, and if that's a good place for them to be seen over ten small toes someday when it's safe to do so.

Between the careful folding, Will considers their visitor, and with her, Beatrice.

A gift, Bedelia had called her, at first like a cheap corporate wine basket, and the second time like a puzzle she was not meant to solve. Will had called her the same the first time he had cursed Hannibal and his impractical idea of what making things better looks like.

Beatrice Evelyn Graham, astonishingly present in the here and now, Doctor Hannibal Lecter tucked carefully behind her existence, impossible to ignore but well-worn like a balmy evening fading to dark. And that's what he is now, Will thinks, balling tiny socks together, pulling dog hair off the corners of stuffed animals and crib sheets, baby watching him and listening to the occasional mindless prattlings of *that's better, let's tuck in this corner, you like this one, I like this one*, because Will has no one to talk to but her. He is a memory rewritten, but no less so still a memory. Bedelia's right - near to 700 years is a death sentence. He will have to live on through Will's gift.

When the chest is seemingly half full, and everything else is in tidy piles against the wall and across the floor to be boxed or ferreted away, it's late. The moon cuts lines more peacefully

than the sun into the wall that match the clock over the stove ticking away at time. Between two nighttime upsets and bottles, and the swaying dance of parents comforting tears with socked feet on cold floors, and watching the glow of the night outside, Will is too tired to dream at all. He closes his eyes with the sheets drawn close and imagines the treetop nest instead, and how they'd fit inside, with everything going on without them below.

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Tuesday dawns surprisingly gentle and obnoxious in equal parts - cloudy with rain that taps at the roof and the gutters, and his phone buzzing near the wall where it sits plugged in.

Will opens his eyes to Beatrice still resting in her swaddle, wrapped tight and warm. He turns slowly to look at her. She has that particular slack faced charm that speaks to thirty more minutes of peace, and doesn't flinch when he rises from the bed carefully. Whatever the buzzing of the phone is for, she's been content to ignore it.

He mutes the phone - all twenty missed calls from yesterday and this morning ignored, which everyone should expect from him at this point and yet they persist, in higher volume by the day including this morning's from an unrecognizable number. The baby slumbers on, softly breathing, and that's really all the incentive Will needs to take a shower.

If one erases the trip to prison, and his extended stay in the ICU following Hannibal's attempt at sending a breakup letter with misappropriated kitchen knives (*and one must do that*), Will can't imagine a time before having children that he would worry about when the next opportunity to wash himself would be. It's seemed a given ever since his first apartment in New Orleans, cheaper than therapy, more satisfying than a good night's sleep.

Get sweaty in the humidity? Shower, repeatedly.

Spent too long at a crime scene? Shower, and try to lose focus.

Lurid, guilty thoughts about murder and shadow people hanging out around your property? Shower, with hotter water and keep your hands above belly button level.

Covered in formula, wearing the same underwear from yesterday, and think you stepped in spilled condensation from a microwave meal? We'll see when the boss allows, the boss being approximately twelve pounds of demands, codependency, and hunger, which Will supposes is better than 200 pounds of that with additional collegiate education.

(*Not better, but different. You think you'd happily settle for both, even if you can't picture it. It feels impossible.*)

Stepping into one now with the door open to listen for the signature signs of an early breakfast meltdown, Will ends up sitting on the bottom of the tub and letting the water just cascade over his head, missing Chiyoh again for what is likely the fortieth time in two days. It still smells vaguely like her in the steam sometimes - just the vaguest hint of spicy soap, which is less sensual and more so depressing, like hearing a song that was on the radio in your first car accident.

Will hasn't heard from her at all in the week that's passed, but she's not exactly the type to communicate anything that she's doing, and it's more likely she appears like the Count of Monte Cristo sabotaging rivals after a stay at the Chateau D'If than she is to call and check in. He doesn't expect her to. He has the money now to find a stand-in for her, but he doesn't trust anyone to do so. It's hard finding help that is twenty years in a crumbling castle committed, completely ignoring the connection to known couture-wearing lunatics with penchants for consuming human offal.

He does wonder if he's supposed to leave a post-it on the fridge just in case. ***Gone to the Azores***, perhaps. ***Two cans of Campbell's chicken noodle in the top left cabinet if you want dinner***. ***Ciao!*** If she didn't kill him after seeing it, she'd certainly file it away as a reason to later.

Will doesn't even know what's in the Azores. He thinks volcanoes? Bullfinches? He doesn't know the capital, or where he'd stay, or the language, or even why he thinks it other than it's a change from everything else, closed off from his own backyard for fear of being seen, by reporters, photographers, sharp eyed women who see him for what he is. New flavors of chaos outside the door each day, and still better than the increasingly stale taste of here.

He spends so much time considering this that he dozes, lulled by the sussuration of water inside and out. It streams over his ears, and his eyes, and for a minute he is able to be by himself. He needed to close his eyes anyway to keep the water out of them, and he's so tired that it's all that it takes.

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It's only once the water goes cold that he shocks awake, covered in goosebumps and his heart in his throat. The sound of the shower is the same, but changed somehow in texture, bouncing down the hall into the kitchen and living room with changed hollows in each.

He turns off the water with a hiss, and listens: still no fussing, still no breaks in the rain. Will grits his teeth to the cold beyond the shower curtain and slides his way to the tiles, squeaking as he goes. Long enough for cold water is long enough for someone to renew their assault against his hermitude. Long enough to roll over in a crib and accidentally smother themselves, no insidious miscreants of the eastern seaboard necessary at all. Will knows. He's *read* it.

Will throws his robe on, too anxious to dry off, and flies down the hall.

***Idiot cannibal apologist kills own child in tragic linen pile collapse***, the news would say, because he should have just finished putting everything away instead of becoming dependent on the resident in-law who peaced out after one too many reconstituted chicken meals. Single mothers and fathers find time to clean every day across the vastness of the globe, so Will really isn't excused, no matter his sullen mood or heavy eyes.

***Sad man as described by local bitchy psychiatrist declared inept at parenting; baby given to nice local wealthy lesbian couple for entirely unsuspicious reasons until responsible adult can be found***, comes another possibility. He is less opposed to the lesbian couple bit - Alana and Margot being excellently maternal and already trying for babies - and more that he's not really excited about hammering out a custody agreement with someone who was ok with setting him up to get his face transplanted like he's a nice sapling tree instead of promoting the degloving of his skull.

Truly, this is not Will's year.

He rounds the corner with feet stomping. The living room, when he arrives to it, is not as he left it. Will holds his breath, expecting the worst.

The rain rattles more loudly, the window nearest to the bed open, blinds somewhat askew from the entry of something. The only loose window of three, easily opened if someone knows which side to push at. It appears someone is finally bold enough to give it a try after all.

The rifle remains upright in the corner of the room. Beatrice is not in her bassinet.

Beatrice is not in her bassinet, Will repeats, and feels the color go out of his face.

She's not far though.

Indeed no, she's quite enjoying breakfast without Will, having welcomed their second unanticipated visitor for the week. With her is Hannibal, bottle in hand, face and arm badly abraded but scabbed over, perched like he owns the place on top of the hope chest, looking every bit like the stork that brought her, black, white and red and very pleased with himself, probably just as likely to suplex him to get in the door.

He wipes the water from his face, hair sticking to it.

Hannibal is here.

The thought that follows right after that, as his eyes draw down to the baby and to the task at hand, heart still beating a cadence in his chest: did he check to make sure the bottle was cooled down enough? 98.6 degree fahrenheit, normal human body temperature? Does he use metric instead, or is he some kind of heathen that eyeballs it?

Hannibal plows on, ignorant of Will's sudden control issues, far happier with his task. He's wet with rain. He's smiling, the same kind he saves for masterpieces in museums, and cheekbites twelve teeth deep into Cordell Doemling, and now for pauses to breathe around formula and adjust the angle of Beatrice's head. Eyes creased with genuine pleasure, speaking low and unfamiliar to her in what is only for the two of them. His hand is dirty with dried blood, but it props her neck easily in a one armed grip, and her balanced like a milk-bloated football with footie-pajamas.

He is disgustingly competent at all this, like his cousin before him, and probably every other human being other than Will forever after, and Will wants to hate him for it, but Will's throat is a vice clamped around what is either a long chant of swear words, or gross sobbing at the sudden relief he feels at seeing him. He wants a picture of it, something to plaster over all the images of them apart. He watches as long as he can before his vision wavers.

(*Thirty minutes before you couldn't imagine this scene, prepared to be alone. Now that you've seen it you can't think of it any other way.*)

Will doesn't think he notices him. Will doesn't think he notices much of anything other than the way that Beatrice curls her finger into tiny balls, nails carefully clipped and tidy in a way Will can manage for her, but not himself.

But because Hannibal is Hannibal, that's not true.

"We're not very hungry this morning it seems," he says, rough but cheerful, and wiping the edge of Beatrice's mouth with the corner of a swaddle from the bordering piles around his perch. She has begun to fuss, turning her head away - surely not full, but not totally content, though Hannibal doesn't let this bother him at all, stroking the side of her cheek. "New hands make for different meals."

He rolls his shoulders, watching her wave her arms with dark, warm eyes. "I tried to call before stepping in, as I saw the sign on the door and thought it sounded quite sincere in its aspirations to cause bodily harm," Hannibal explains, "but you were in the shower and it would be rude to interrupt."

Sensible. Polite. Infuriatingly typical of him.

Will ambles closer, sits his damp body next to Hannibal's on the chest, and takes the bottle from Hannibal's hand. He dabs a small amount of milk on his wrist.

"It's getting too cold," he rasps, tears in his voice but not on his face, looking for somewhere to put his restless energy. "She's getting picky. She won't eat it when it gets too cold."

Hannibal's hand, now free of the bottle, comes up to rest on the back of Will's neck, middle and ring finger rubbing wet hair between them like he's writing a new memory, thumb resting on the side of Will's face.

"Then we'll heat it up," he says, "and go on as you have."

This time when he pulls Will close, there is no knife, and no hidden daughters in the wings of the house, or men and women bleeding in the pantry and halls. No phone calls, no cameras, no rows of onlookers and lawmen, waiting for someone to make a mistake. There is the smell of damp grass, and asphalt, and the musk of wet hair and sweat, laundry, powdered formula and the taste of a bloody mouth to his, brushing feather light and careful.

# getting yourself together when your family is apart

Hannibal is amongst the last to hear of his finest scandal prior to sentencing.

It irks him if he thinks about it too long, that he is ignorant of something so personal. Five years prior, it would have merited an entire flow chart classifying the order that he would express his displeasure to people. Maybe a venture into restauranteering. It's shameful to waste product in that kind of volume.

He will look his proudest when the prosecution and defense finally rest, when his punishment is read to him in a fine Italian-cut suit with gilded peak lapels and poppy red lining - but not so today, when everything is in chaos outside, and all he expects is another droll day of testimony. The monotony of incarceration marches on, and shows no sign of stopping or mercy.

The holding room beside the courtroom is quiet - two armed guards on either side of the door, Hannibal's wrists affixed to the table by a metal tether. It clinks, one chain link at a time, when he pulls at it, and so Hannibal doesn't. He'd rather not be centered in this space by the dull metronome of capture.

Hannibal instead gives his mind permission to wander to other places, beyond the taste of cheap toothpaste dispensed in small, soft tubes, and the irksome pain in his shoulders from another night of sleeping on hard foam. Beyond the *tick, tick, tick* of his cuffs straining against themselves.

He feels old, especially for a father of a child barely a few months in age. He feels it this morning particularly, miraculous gender-defying virility aside.

He wonders why Byron hasn't arrived yet. Another *special* facet of incarceration and being on trial: that Hannibal rarely gets more than five minutes with his lawyer before each day in

the courtroom, and only an hour at night.

Hannibal thinks this is less by design and more by the habit of a terminally late captain of his guard, who rumbles up to the steps of the correctional facility in his steel box on wheels to take Hannibal all of 100 yards to the west through the parking lot to the back of the courthouse. This is treated as though they have been asked to ford a river by caulking a conestoga wagon. The result is a frequently rushed transit that would have been better served by a brisk walk, perhaps something more akin to taking a particularly mean dog around the block, instead of the show of force that they insist it to be.

“All nonsense,” he says with a cheery smile, like they’ve done it just for him.

(*They have, technically, at your request, which makes it all the more amusing.*)

“They’d blow your head off if you just walked,” Byron tells him honestly one day while recess is called for lunch - after a good prodding about Miriam Lass whose family glares across the courtroom like there’s nothing they’d like so much as to hang him by his toes from the Transamerica Tower. “Plenty of people with the motivation who just need the opportunity to exercise it.”

“And likely need the exercise besides,” Hannibal replied blithely at the time, considering the backs of his hands, starting to pale in the sunless days of his cell. “Not a very difficult crowd they’d have to contend with to do it, considering the quality of the prison staff. Were it not for their guns, I suspect I could outrun the officers even with the ankle cuffs. Perhaps that is why they insist on their little van - they might be expected to do cardio otherwise.”

Hannibal is not very popular with his keepers. He can’t imagine why not.

“*Please* don’t try,” Byron huffs. “Not unless you think you can make it.”

Today, however, the transport staff seem determined to run straight up to the start time, Byron coming in with them with the cross look of one who has a straight pin left in the collar of their suit, pressing against skin. Byron’s arms are loaded with the usual portfolios, and a

sharp watch, but today includes a discreetly folded stack of bond paper, printed off from a website in haste with no time to staple it together. He looks at it like it smells foul.

Hannibal wonders who has left him so far from his polished, official mask, and if it's something his own nose would cringe away from.

"It's going to be a shitty day," Byron says as one would make a decree, bypassing the pleasantries with a grim frown. "But thanks to our friends at the penitentiary and their equally shitty timing, *you* won't really get to know why until lunch."

"Have they brought another bologna sandwich with American cheese and a fruit cup?" Hannibal asks, smiling his facetious best. "I *did* ask for a muffaletta, but perhaps that doesn't fall into the purview of 'reasonable accommodation'."

"Reasonable accommodation shouldn't have to include me threatening to sue if they keep violating your visitation restrictions to make a few extra bucks, but apparently I didn't drive that home enough," Byron hisses, falling in step behind when the guards begin the tedious task of moving him from holding room to court. "Guess we'll make some money on it later…Shouldn't change anything about testimony today, fortunately."

The lawyer chews on that a moment longer before adding, "Substantially changes attendance. Try not to be visibly disappointed."

Hannibal nods - only one name merits such a warning.

"Then let us play to our dedicated few," he says, wrists too tight together to adjust the sleeves between the halls. After all, what's a smaller audience when the show is the same day after day?

—

The walk from the holding room to the courtroom is only slightly better than the half-block drive from the prison to the holding cell. It is the shuffling of a great bear, prodded and pushed to roar once more, the scent of forest and night and fresh meat just beyond the circus doors of Baltimore's federal courthouse if he can but last another performance.

Coming to the stand the morning of a Wednesday in late May, projections of the Verger estate casualties written on a rolling screen in washed out color, Hannibal prepares for his first day of testimony in his trial that he must deliberately lie. A mild nuisance, but hardly the most difficult thing he has suffered since his incarceration began. Hannibal is an artist, and plagiarism is distasteful.

Alas, a deal's a deal, and a handful of hair sprinkled in the right place creates a number of questions he must answer to keep the deal at all. He has promises to keep after all, and Margot Verger is such a dedicated attendant of the trial with her lovely companion and Hannibal's previous paramour, Alana.

Today, they are red-lipped and powerful from the pews, two pretty confidantes sitting as though in a mass with hands discreetly clasped. They whisper behind each other's hair. They button their collars to the neck, and ease them for each other alone. They are white-faced and vaguely miserable looking, which Hannibal doesn't really appreciate while taking the credit for their own misdeeds for the last several hours.

Byron's warning seems a little dire for the simple absence of Will, no matter that he is irked by it. Hannibal misses him - his handsome white ghost in the wings of the room, and the repeating dusty suit and red collared shirt. Will has been an ardently dedicated if eye contact avoidant attendee. With good reason, Hannibal concedes, and learns to appreciate his silent vigil, the smoothness of his face that is a mask for darker things.

It seems wrong that he is gone, that instead there are the hungry faces of press staff.

They are ravenous today. Hannibal's can't really think why, beyond the spectacle of Mason's bloated face once more displayed like a painting of poor reconstructive surgery, and poor choice of interior fish tank locations, but there's no accounting for taste or subtlety amongst their lot. Crime scene photos show hired hands sprinkled like unattractive confetti sprinkles on the white-iced grounds of Muskrat Farms, and Hannibal nods handsomely to take the blame for each.

He spots Freddie Lounds as he usually does in her corona of red curls, but she is unusually sullen today, casting hateful glances not at him, but rather another familiar face - Jon Sekine, who looks as though he's come to own the moon by accidental windfall, and the longer Hannibal looks, the more he realizes that several of the press watch him with a mix of anger and envy that doesn't seem to befit a human interests reporter.

*"It's going to be a shitty day*," Byron had said, and that he'd have to wait to know why.

Hannibal breathes slowly from his seat to keep the puzzlement out of his face at the buzz of this thought, and his suspicion of it and Will's missing shape against the far wall. He tries to attend to the prosecutor, buzzing like a fly, and make good on his promise to be the resident rabid animal, and give them all something to write about and laugh at.

That is how he can keep Beatrice and Will safe - be a bear made to rise on his hind legs and snarl.

—

By his own estimation, Hannibal hasn't gone out of his way to lie a single day in his life, save for a rare few occasions where nature or necessity made it impossible to avoid.

This technically is true if one lives by the considerations of half-truths not being lies of omission, deliberately dancing around straight answers, and liberal interpretations of reality being more a mode of personal, totally well-intended philosophy. Which, respectfully, Hannibal does.

(*Convenient, if you do say so yourself.*)

What's a little obfustication between friends, strangers, and law enforcement?

Sure, there's a time around the age of four where he becomes aware of what lying is at all, and like all small children, must thoroughly exhaust his newfound skill before discovering that there are in fact *consequences* for being caught in a lie. A switch to the backside and a week of no apple cake brings an end to these early days of reckless deceit. He learns to do better - not better at being truthful, but better at making it seem less like a falsehood. The interim years of not having to speak at all at the orphanage help him hone perception rather than direct lies into a weapon.

Undoubtedly, there's the time between the introduction of Murasaki Lecter and his Uncle Robertas' death that necessitates not letting anyone know he is harboring both a desire to kill no less than five men, and a decidedly non familial love for his aunt. Even with as secretive as Hannibal can be, adolescent boys are prone to being incredibly obvious in appearance and attitude thanks to the deluge of hormones and lack of manly wisdom, and Robertas isn't an idiot. The attraction fades with the years, of course, and he does eventually wildly succeed in shuffling off a few mortal coils, but in those early days it is better to bald-faced lie about what he has in his pocket - a knife or an erection alike.

(*You are subject to physical affliction as much as the next man, albeit you are substantially less shy about sharing your intentions these days. You're also less likely to get an unlooked for erection now that you aren't fighting puberty, so that has made it easier to choose when and where to share by a substantial margin. And your margin is* ***substantial****, humbly and medically speaking.*)

Absolutely, there's the months of Will's initial illness, where Hannibal mostly skirts the edges of lying by simply never giving a straight answer.

(*You try not to consider Will, trembling in the dining room in those early days, begging you to not lie to him. At least not very often, beyond the image of how sick he was, white-faced and sweating under the beams of his own mind's heat. That may be the first outright lie that you've told in years. You are not ashamed of it, but you are shy of it, as one is shy of a dog that is known to bite, and will never admit that you did and you are. Lied. Are a liar.*)

There's also the several months between Italy and France where he becomes Dr. Roman Fell to consider - Hannibal would argue that technically he *was* Roman Fell by merit of becoming him. Who's to say wearing the name and titles of someone doesn't metaphorically make that valid? Certainly not Hannibal, who takes to it like a part in a stage production, and are actors not the incarnation of their characters?

And then there is today.

From morning to the cusp of noon, Hannibal has told more absolute lies than he thinks he has cumulatively in a long time. Yes or no questions make for difficult side-steps. Mutually agreed upon planted evidence doubly so, and the inability to not just drug everyone into the sweet oblivion of not having the wherewithal to poke at that gives him indigestion - but perhaps that's just the spiteful bologna sandwiches already making him sick before he's had the chance to eat them.

Or, he thinks with a frown he doesn't share on his face, perhaps it is from the way that everyone has watched him today, with a raptness that doesn't quite suit the level of spectacle he thought he was providing. A glance to the back of the room proves them all to be just as intense as earlier, and perhaps more so as the lunch break draws closer.

"Doctor Lecter," says the prosecutor, calling his attention back.

"Yes?" Hannibal very pleasantly replies, smiling politely.

"Before we adjourn shortly, I wanted to make a clarification. At deposition, and at arraignment, and today in court, you have confessed to the deaths of 10 people at Muskrat Farms, including Mason Verger," continues the prosecutor, pacing the floor as caged creatures do. "This was done using common household tools, drowning, and by ballistics observation, a high-powered rifle."

Hannibal nods, placid and smiling still, but irked. "Yes, we have covered this extensively today," he replies. "In technicolor and high definition by projector, even."

This prompts a few awkward laughs, more in line with what he usually suspects over the ravening eyes that today brings with it. The prosecutor is less amused though, and rolls his shoulders like Hannibal is tedious.

He clears his throat, ignoring Hannibal. "During discovery, it was noted that the rifle used in the incident was not recovered. Can you recount for the jury what happened to it?"

*My estranged cousin and au pair is probably polishing the stock right now between removing soiled diapers and antagonizing Will*, comes the unbidden reply that Hannibal keeps behind his teeth. His amusement takes on an honest color at the image though. How pastoral of them, holed up in Wolf Trap like an Edwardian household in confinement.

"Dropped," he says with a shrug. "Awkward to carry with no shoulder strap when you already have your arms full. I'm afraid you'll find opportunistic predators beyond the kind that like to eat in the Virginia backwoods - a free Remington 700 series is hardly something to leave in the snow."

A lie with a truth. That helps it go down a bit better, a chaser of sorts.

The prosecutor doesn't easily take the bait of the criminal logic equivalent of a shot of vodka with pickle juice behind it, though his face goes sour like he did anyway.

"So you're saying you dropped your most effective weapon to tuck Will Graham into bed," he says, head turned.

"Yes and no," Hannibal says and leans back in the witness chair like his own office.

The prosecutor's eyes alight for a brief moment - perhaps Hannibal will make his day more interesting than handwaving through confessions of mass murder after all. Perhaps the hard hitting justice and word play will unravel Hannibal's unflappable good attitude and weirdly obliging insistence that Mason's face looked like it belonged at the bottom of an eel tank, no matter that it would have been out of his way to do. Not everyone wants to play games for Margot Verger's unexpected inheritance. Some people will not be happy with anything except bald-faced, not open to interpretation truth.

Hannibal supposes he can give him a little of that - to grease the wheels that will coast them to the trial's inevitable end.

(*And because you miss Will, and he is not here to be embarrassed by the truth, no matter that you keep trying to hand it to him as something that is not to be ashamed of.* )

“I picked *up* a more effective weapon, and left a tool of convenience behind,” he says with a wink and a grin. “Don’t you put your glock under your pillow at night, Mr. Warren? Wouldn’t you think I’d want to do the same with mine?”

Will would either scowl or blush if he were here to hear it, but is it not true that the blade that cuts deepest is him? Has it not always been the case that Will is a dangerous thing made kind by his understanding that he *is* ?

What Hannibal wouldn’t give to have something so reliable to pull from the sheets in times of impending violence. Or to just pull Will *in* the sheets. Word choice up for interpretation.

Hannibal smiles again to himself.

Play to the absurdity of his love, Byron has told him again and again, like Hannibal doesn’t know it is already, enough so to go sprinkling children around by archaic bird euphemisms gone literal without either party’s express legal permission, personal wishes aside. Play to the fact that it sounds crazy that a doctor in his forties would throw away everything for a sweaty younger man that’s never shown much interest in theater, and murder, or men for that matter, no matter his aptitude or mere lack of experience. Doesn’t that sound like the work of an obsessive lunatic?

Today though, it doesn’t land quite as expected.

“Yeah, I guess that sounds about right,” the prosecutor says lightly, as though not intending to, instead of his usual dour grumbling and requests to stay on topic.

Hannibal feels his brows draw together without thought. The judge does much the same, he notes.

He looks at the rest of the room.

*Yeah, that sounds about right*, says the entirety of it, and Jon Sekine smiling in the back, and sweating at the neck of his collar with every hour that passes.

Hannibal is not accustomed to feeling like the butt of a joke, but the inescapable sensation of being less of a show animal with teeth and more of a clown comes down on him as heavily as any curtain.

(*It's never been a joke how much you love Will. It's just everyone else that seemed to think it was, and maybe now that they understand, you look foolish for ever trying to convince them that they were right.*)

"Prosecution rests," says Mr. Warren, who isn't satisfied, but at least has no other lies to request.

—-

"What exactly have I missed, Byron?" asks Hannibal as soon as they finish wheeling him into the holding room once more, cuffs clicking on the table, feet restless on the floor.

In another life, the one before this one between hospital halls and 12-hour shifts in blue scrubs, he would be able to walk the anticipation out of him, one floor to another, with new distractions in each. Now instead he presses the soft rubber of his shoes to the linoleum of the floor, and considers the metatarsals grinding against them, and how satisfying it would be to pry them from the neighboring guard's feet to be made into something more useful.

*Galbi jjim* sound exciting. Toes could be like short ribs in the right sauce, surely.

Byron's cross look only grows thorns, as though it was *his* toes under consideration to be served with rice, which would be ashamed considering the lovely collection of longwing brogues that put some of Hannibal's own best shoes to shame.

“Just the front page of *The Atlantic* this morning,” Byron replies, and pulls his stack of printed papers from a tidy black folio to slide across the table.

They sit, coffin-lid still, until Byron offers more.

“To no one’s surprise, you were in it, but you weren’t the central figure,” he explains. “The fruits of one of those interviews you made, and apparently didn’t just give them a recommendation for a wine pairing with their braised pancreas.”

“That would taste terrible - imagine navigating the bile residue,” Hannibal says absently, before going very still at the headline printed in front of him.

***The Sin of Inheritance***, it reads, and Hannibal doesn’t need to be told where that story goes.

He pins the first page between two white fingers anyway, and feels the paper and his forehead crease.

Byron is apologetic in tone, like it is his fault. Unlikely, but not improbable - it’s hardly important given that everyone has played a small role in the mystery of Will Graham’s new person to become attached to. “I let Graham know on the way over this morning - it’s why I didn’t follow you from the penitentiary. I advised him not to come. He didn’t know about it yet, but he’s smart - he’ll keep his head down. Him and his ‘help’ alike.”

Hannibal nods, still staring downwards. He shuffles between pages, and feels the first hurt pull of his pride and anger at a harried photo of Will clutching something very small and secret to his chest.

It is aptly named, the good works of Jon Sekine who tries to impress with his collared shirts and careful wording. All sins are born of want after all, and Hannibal has yet to experience love in a way that did not end in the most tar-black kind. Wrath, gluttony, avarice, lust, made more powerful by his saving those feelings for things he deigns worthy of his emotion. His

desire for Will and everything that follows after is no different, no matter that these days Hannibal tries his hand at virtues instead.

"Then there's nothing more to be done, save to end the show," Hannibal says tightly, and does his best in the days following to do so.

He can't quite expedite the trial, but it's a near thing with how short, mean-spirited, and pointed a story he can tell when he has a mind to.

(*A first for you - having nothing more to say save insults and curt descriptions of how best to relieve men of their organs. Yes to all the charges but only because you are obsessed and hungry. No to all the culpability because only the terrible god of church collapses would make anyone experience hunger for something the way that you hunger for Will, as though you ever actually had a choice.*)

(*You wonder if anyone's ever plead that as a defense for insanity before - "Yes, I did everything wrong, hateful, and vile because I loved him, Your Honor, and I hate to see him punished for it."*)

—

"Lose your patience with being the devil in the room?" asks Alana from across the visitor's table.

It is the evening before the jury deliberation will end, and Hannibal Lecter will at last be handed his sentence by the good people of the Federal District of Maryland and given his just desserts. Rather, it is an unremarkable Thursday, bookended with flavorless, soggy rice. He will have four more nights at the esteemed diner table of the warden, including this one before he is all but guaranteed by his spectacular lying to be transferred by order of the court to his new dreadful home.

That Alana appears to rub it in is the kind of pettiness he would expect.

He's kind of proud she learned that from him. She always was a good student.

"Or just less motivation to be the center of attention when you can't control the narrative?" she adds, head turned to the advantage of her soft jawline, making it hard.

Hannibal thinks it's the first time he's spoken to her alone since the night at the farm. Maybe further back than that - their bloody final communion on the night of Abigail's actual death is hardly a private conversation, nor being hog-tied and branded in a pig pen. They take turns as the aggressor in either memory.

Here, they are both made vulnerable: him in his prison fatigues, her in her state of expectancy. Hannibal doesn't *know* she is expecting as much as he *anticipates* it, in the way she defends her abdomen subconsciously, cupping her hand over ears that will not have yet developed yet like he might swear in front of the fetus and transform its life to one of crime.

Hannibal feels more inclined to graciousness today, imagining what that would be like - not turning zygotes to a life full of felonies, but pressing fingertips to the shell of the delicate helix of an infant.

(*You have one now, somewhere in Virginia. Couriered directly by the nostalgic sound of big wings flying from tree to tower, watching your heart and hands for things to want.*)

"Better ways to spend my time," Hannibal says with a sigh like he's not looking down the barrel of max security and an indescribable number of future years alone, wanting his little wished-for family with jealous hands. He's more of a man of the moment - no sense agonizing right now.

Alana thinks that's funny. Her mouth curves in an attractive cut of red.

"Banging out a few heirs, yourself?" she asks, and Hannibal marvels that she can even ask it. He further marvels at her easy acceptance that something as simple as coitus would make a child between two men, but has yet to have a reasonable conversation on the topic.

“It will be very diverting to see how much in total we have in common,” he says instead.

“I hope and look forward to several of these kinds of *fun* chats then, if you’ll oblige me with your time, Hannibal. Seeing as your schedule will be so full,” she says, fingers folded together at the edge of the table. She’s been awarded the stewardship of Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane with all that money she’s married into after all, and has spared no expense to make a very attractive box for him to spend the hours in. It’s been implied for weeks between their lawyers. It’s all but confirmed now. She’ll know just when he’s available, anytime that he is.

“I’ll trust you to add it to my program of psychiatric treatment,” Hannibal replies as cordially as he can, and doesn’t trust himself to not ask if he’d have time to see anyone else. Better to not lead with that, where it can be held over his head as a treat for good behavior like a book or a half-portion extra of something he likes to eat.

She seems disappointed that he doesn’t, but Hannibal knows no matter that she was a quick study, he wasn’t ever transparent enough for her to cut her kitten teeth on. Let her dig somewhere else for gossip, or the validity of his feelings for Will.

—

It is easy to pretend to be big and ferocious on Friday, with every available and court hearing admissible camera on the east coast pointed at him. He squares his shoulders and grins with a sharp mouth and promises them many more good times to follow in the future as he would any guest at the end of a party.

“Let’s do this again soon,” he says to the prosecutor in a parting shot.

“We’ll have to catch up after the holidays,” he tells the judge.

“I’ll keep a chair open for you,” he waves to Freddie Lounds like it’s the finest thing he has to give. “And a plate open for him,” he adds with a glance at Jon Sekine.

It is less fun on Saturday and Sunday when he is closed into his room with none to speak to, and no reason to be sought out at all. His custody is still given to the state, but his leash to Alana Bloom, and she is very clear in her instructions that he is to not be allowed anyone but his lawyer, assuming he has any need of one at this point. Her cage will be ready on Monday, Hannibal's parade of a motorcade with it. Whatever civil cases they'd like to level him with can ambulance-chase behind them, ignorant that they can level him with more charges, but there's not enough money to please them that isn't entailed away in discreet, legal terms that should never bring them instead to Will.

*Game, set*, *match,* he applauds himself when the cell door closes, and he can crack his neck and hands without it being construed as a clear and present danger that can only be remedied with a pacifying gunshot to the head.

It sounds cruel from the outside, being denied any contact, even being what he is. Hannibal himself would assume it to be a parting jab from Alana, were it not for his suspicion of some small part of her trying to save Will any more embarrassment from Hannibal's shiny toothed smiles and glib suggestions to reporters what building they may find their bowels hung from in the future, put to better use outside rather than in. "Everyone's favorite window dressing," he says in one brief conversation the week before. "Especially mine."

Admirable of her to try and let his name quietly burn out until the next anniversary of a murder, or a trial - his or Will's being of no consequence. It would be the loving thing to do, for him to allow it.

It would, he thinks when it is quietest in the halls at night, and he can be honest with himself.

The mattress remains as stalwartly rectangular and featureless as ever, foam slowly enveloping him the longer that he lies on it, back slowly coming to touch the frame holding it. It hurts the long line of his back, pressing up against the scar tissue of his brand.

Hannibal folds his hands up behind his neck and tries to walk in the halls of his mind instead down the gravel drive of Will's house. That suits him better, even if he is technically a tried and convicted killer of no less than twenty six people (*that they have evidence for anyway, you smugly think*), and has probably earned his terrible mattress and white walls as god intended.

Despite the prodigious skill he has in imagining things other than what they are, Hannibal finds himself stuck outside. A visitor still, not a part of the household. It is a grey dawn he pictures, akin to the one he puts to memory on the day Will is arrested.

He thinks it ought to be sunny and warm. He puts the artistry of thought to it, painting the sky in broad strokes. The sun peeks from the corners of the property, and begins to blush the line of the roof, wake the dogs, start the coffee maker. Will is a hard man to wake from sleep, though perhaps less so with a child - Hannibal will need to knock on the door.

Now, what must he change next, to walk further in?

There are briar roses at either side of where the drive begins at the mailbox and roadside, snaking thorned branches - Hannibal has never seen them in spring, when they would leaf out and bloom as they surely do now. He wonders if they are the same pink as the ones he recalls seeing in Bolzano as a younger man, the towering lines of the Dolomites shading the mornings rather than the long line of trees that stand near to the yellow farmhouse in Wolf Trap. He wonders if he'll ever know, or if he must always imagine them differently to shake the winter off of them. They bloom at his feet, smelling pollen-sweet.

Hannibal greens up the grass. He imagines the blades of iris leaves in the front beds before the porch, punching up like knives from between the bushes. He sends long bands of thin cloud to glow gold-cream-white overhead.

Still, Hannibal feels stuck, feet ground down into the gravel, watching morning touch the wood and windows of the house. The door remains shut against him, and his body rigid with the line of the mattress that exists just outside of this chimera of a place.

It wasn't so hard before, was it?

(*How long will you have to do this? comes the nagging fear from the quiet hall, the solid emptiness of a concrete ceiling.*)

It wasn't, he thinks - to go back to a kinder time. Dreaming up the clutch of tiny hands, or the soft tread of Will's feet on the wood floors. It's about the only thing he's thought of since he

was made aware that Beatrice existed, and that Will felt something for him. Hannibal has never lacked for his ability to order his mind into a world that pleases him, even without personal experience with having children, or seeing Will's house in the warm breeze of spring turning to summer. It has been so easy until now.

Hannibal can admit that perhaps he is a little afraid of that - not experiencing the rest of their lives. Forever outside, unable to sketch the lines of what he wants because he doesn't know what it actually looks like as time passes and the landscape changes.

Worse still, he doesn't seem to have many means to make it happen.

He stands, shuffling his feet in black oxfords that he technically only owns for hearing dates now. The gravel is icy with winter, the ground hard where his knees know its bite from kneeling.

(*You had trusted Will to grow tired of life without you.*)

The morning dims backwards into night - blue with the switch of the sun's course now eastwards. The briar roses begin to fold close, frost chilled and browned at their edges. Hannibal feels tired, hands behind his head, body stretched out long. His back hurts. The brand mark is numb.

(*You had trusted it would happen quickly, maybe a decade to punish you because you had earned it, a tiger that doesn't change his stripes, but you never pictured in between that he could need to protect something other than himself from you, which he has never been anything but careless with. Now he cannot let you out so long as Beatrice is threatened by it, and you are not convinced you are supposed to let yourself out either.*)

"The kind thing would be to leave them alone," says Hannibal the Elder, smoke listing in the dark from the burning tip of a cigarette. "So they don't abandon the nest."

"So they'll be back next year," says Simonetta, wrapped in a fur that smells of mothballs and old silk lining - as he has last seen it, not as she last wore it. Perhaps still mildewing behind

whatever room Chiyoh called her own, too proper to take it from the lady of the house, a few decades removed. “And the years after that.”

(*You had trusted you would be given what you wanted, if you were patient once more.)*

The three of them stand, watching the roofline disappear in a growing blue light of a receding morning. The lights of the windows stay darkened, Will sleeping somewhere inside behind them. “I want you to fix what you broke,” his dreams ask of Hannibal, and Hannibal wonders if perhaps he must go further back than the kitchen floor of his own home in Baltimore to know where that starts. Perhaps before himself.

*Yes*, Hannibal thinks. *Yes, that would make sense*.

He turns on a heel - cork, leather, eight clever tacks and a roller of paste holding them all together to be forgotten in some box at the possessions locker - meaning to leave it as he did before.

A creak.

He stops instead, listening to what he hopes is the opening of the door.

No, Hannibal considers with a cold eyed look from the shut-tight door to porch to road, where any minute now he expects the police cars to rattle down the road. Another creak, and a rattle of another kind, comes from above.

The leaves, dead, living green, something of both fighting to the forefront of the scene, play their tune against each other, trembling. A *woosh* of air thundering down from their branches, beech, birch, and oaks rustling against its force. The old wood creaks and sways, a promise of change in the canopy.

Hannibal lifts his head with a sore glance -

- and promptly takes an entire face full of black feathers and reddened beak, flying at him as surely as a knife with an attitude and incredible wing lift.

He cannot entirely describe it later, beyond impressions of the kind that one has at the end of nightmares.

There is the impression of bright, brown eyes, and the iridescence of a long neck, shimmering in the receded light of the dawn. There is the brief thought entertaining if he has been shot, or stabbed as he has been warned might happen in prison, or if instead this is the pummeling of prison guard fists that he has fantasized away to make the long-necked creature that has only ever been a distant concept that accepts small fish from small children, and little prayers made in the eaves of old houses on this side of the planet as much as the one he was born to.

He considers also if storks have the actual body mass to break collar bones, as his certainly feels like it has been. Seems like an oversight if they do, letting young boys offer perch to them, but things were different back then he supposes, and allows that his parents probably did all sorts of dangerous things at their parents' suggestion before the science of the days suggests to maybe not.

He turns to ask them - surely still smoking, considering their fine clothes, their fine home, but they fall away with the wings, and the bright pain in his shoulder, and the weakness that makes him think that surrender was ever the answer to any problem he has faced.

Hannibal falls from his prison bunk, heart in his throat, shoulder in fiery pain and waits for the morning from the concrete floor, thinking that his imagination must be entirely fine if he is able to do this much damage with only a couple feet of distance between the bunk and here, or that perhaps he is very old indeed.

—

Of course no one *believes* that someone like Hannibal Lecter succumbs to something as ridiculous as having a nightmare and falling from his own bed, or that it is far enough to break much of anything.

Hannibal agrees with all of this, but insists anyway that it is the case.

"Seeing is believing," he says lightly, and marvels that it is possible as well.

A whole ten people appear with restraints, and threats of beatings if he doesn't allow them to use said items, and at least three that seem to be there so that they have something to report at their end of the shift as having been productive. No one except the pinched-faced penitentiary chaplain has the gall to approach Hannibal to follow up on the injury, cuffed on the floor and no closer to getting medical attention than had he been concussed on a mountainside of the Urals after months of being presumed dead.

The chaplain suggests that Hannibal has been burdened with the guilt of his many crimes.

Hannibal considers suggesting seeing a proctologist, that the man's head is so far up his own ass that he's become unable to see anyone else's, but that a visit to his primary care provider would be in order since Hannibal only performs emergency triage, not orthopedic or anal care.

…Well, he muses to himself, thinking of Will becoming flustered at this sort of speech, who never lets a technicality die in an unmarked grave, *some* anal care.

Hannibal bites his tongue.

"Your mind begins to comprehend the gravity of your many dark deeds," the chaplain intones from beneath his many wrinkles in blissful unawareness, looking for all the world like he was gifted a skin one size too big and refused to own up to needing a different one. Very gracious and godly of him, Hannibal thinks from behind the ache in his chest and neck, to not ask for something better.

"Gravity *is* a constant," Hannibal glibly replies, and very nearly visibly sighs in relief when a nervous-handed medic that appears to expect Hannibal to eat his arm whole comes from the back of the swarm, charged with the responsibility of achieving something. He prods with a

couple jabs of his fingers when Hannibal is rolled to his back for further observation, and then more aptly when he is assured his digits will remain unharmed. “As evidenced by myself, laying here, injured as such by it.”

“God shall see you humbled at the hands of the law, young man,” intones the chaplain.

Hannibal tries to not demure at the compliment with a coy smile, or ask just how old the good chaplain must be to look at Hannibal and see some strapping youthful thing, lest they try to mask him as they also do taking him from the penitentiary to the courthouse. For the cheek and for the teeth, of which he has many.

“The American prison system really does leave something to be desired,” Hannibal grimaces into the concrete instead, hiding amusement behind pain.

The medic eventually confirms that Hannibal has indeed fractured his collarbone. Falling in exactly with Hannibal’s complaint, they insist that it’s just a fracture, but that perhaps they’ll stick to the chains and seat restraints for his ride from the Baltimore core to the hospital at its furthest outskirts, and skip the straight jacket.

“So that they don’t try and pin this on us,” the warden intones, having dealt quite enough with Byron and Alana in recent days to be within mere hours of no longer having to deal with any of them at all, and unwilling to risk it.

“But I do so love a good jacket,” Hannibal snidely replies, and takes a discreet kick to the shoulder that doesn’t hurt so much as throb in time with his pulse, living in the nook between Adam’s Apple and trapezius, beating with curious anticipation in each muscle and vein.

Hannibal knows the anatomy well, that he’ll survive this, that he’ll be fine if they do not pull it further with restraints. Tricky to splint, better to immobilize at the arm instead of the neck. The clavicle, or collarbone in humans.

He smiles to himself.

The furcula, or wishbone in birds.

—

Hannibal's departure from the high security prison to the high security hospital is conducted with very little fanfare, to the great disappointment of the warden and his staff who clearly would have liked to be handed the key to the city in exchange for their time spent enriching themselves with backdoor interviews and photographs like it was a huge burden. There is also a measure of relief in that they will not have to spend much time explaining why he isn't wrapped up and trussed like a Christmas ham, instead looking quite devilish in his bite mask, many splendid chains, and the garishness of the bright penitentiary jumpsuit.

Ironic really, Hannibal thinks while chains are checked and cuffs are rattled, suiting him up in the flash orange meant to tell hunters to *not* shoot.

His amusement doesn't last when one guard situates him in the back of his paddy wagon of a police vehicle, pressing thumb and fingers to the fractured bone in his shoulder. Hannibal is too good an actor to do more than tense his mouth and trace his eyes along the front of the guard's uniform, looking for license numbers. He knows this one, and that this one knows just where to pinch.

"Don't get too comfortable," the man says brusquely - *Hansen,* the name snakes in pretty cursive along the front pocket, force identification code 56412- his tone and aviator sunglasses trying to make up for the utter lack of physical prowess.

"Oh I won't," Hannibal says behind the muffling plastic on his face, committing the information to memory. Terribly inconvenient, taking his rolodex from him. "I would hate for you to think I would like to stay for dinner. Not today anyway."

That gets the thumb and fingers out of his shoulder very quickly indeed.

The effect of the transport is rather like sitting in an ice cream truck. Bright red stripes on the white of the paint outside, screaming *look* rather than *caution*. Cold, as much as can be managed at this time of year, tinny sounding between the constables and marshals on their

radios, talking in furtive voices to each other as people gather outside at a mandatory distance.

The most substantial difference is that Hannibal is rather unlike a strawberry shortcake bar or a festive bomb pop, though he feels like a good imitation of a creamsicle in his current attire. They strap his arms together and tether them to the floor, seatbeat criss-crossed over his chest and padlocked tight. So he is a very *secure* novelty dessert if he is to be one, jacket or no.

The van rumbles to life, two men to either side of him, another two across in the bench seat with their combat shotguns and very serious looks. The doors close with a snap and the slap of someone's hand against them, signaling all is well.

He closes his eyes and listens, and does his best to ignore the temptation of the carpometacarpal joint, pressing ever so gently to the edge of his cuffs. He tries not to think how complex it would be to snap and field set a thumb, if the torque and range he has with his arms not bound to his torso but only the van would be enough to break it all away. The limitation is not his body, even with it slightly damaged from a bump in the night and his teeth capped by the sweaty press of military grade nylon, he reminds himself.

It is four rifles in the cargo, two handguns in the cab, and the motion of the vehicle, and no matter that he despairs at the closing of exits to this chapter of his story, it is the living that are victors, and he will remember every last name and flash of identification he sees today. Hannibal Lecter will remind them in five-ten-twenty years time that it was always him that was going to come out on top.

—

Literally on top, the loud pop of a tire promises.

Seconds before this: the confused call of the guards assigned to drive their merry band of violent men approximately twenty miles on the discreet forested roads of eastern Baltimore, in what is supposed to be a fairly simple escorted drive of thirty to forty minutes in length.

“The fuck is that on the bridge?” asks someone from the rasping of the hand radio - the lead of the caravan surely, first scout in their parade.

Hannibal opens his eyes.

“Some kind of bird, you think?” asks someone else. The men who share Hannibal’s cargo hold share looks with each other. “Pelican maybe? Big ass cormorant?”

*May I suggest a stork?* Hannibal muses to himself. *Since they seem in great abundance these days.*

“Oh, you’re some kind of ornithologist now, Jerry?” says the first in a Jersey accent that brooks no argument. “It’s some chick on the guard rails,” they add, gaining volume as they get closer. “Somebody who’s too good for the road closure signs. See the sporty coat? Maybe one of them jogging types or-”

No one really clarifies though, because whoever Jerry is in disagreement with seems to be correct. An explosive sound hits the front of the van, and with it a strong lurching of the vehicle. When the marshals go to check their weapons, unbuckling to check in the passthrough window, yelling through the ruckus of sound coming over the signal, a stronger lurch of the vehicle comes to the back tire, and rather than concerning themselves with the flora and fauna of the local waterways, the van takes a hard right into a roll.

*Ah,* thinks Hannibal, and feels a giddiness that he has not thought to entertain since Will last looked at him from across the courtroom gallery. Whether the giddiness is the extreme force turning the van like a fallen spice jar, or actual legitimate excitement is uncertain.

*Not a bird, but a very skilled bird hunter*.

It could be that Hannibal breaks a thumb to pull a hand from the cuffs. It could be that the lurching of the van does it for him, jostling the entirety of him, knocking his head against the van wall and his feet against the floor and each other. He wouldn’t put it past the US marshals to be any more rigorous with their standards than the penitentiary staff and have bought a military grade surplus that is excellent for pictures in still shots, but not much use in an active

vehicle accident. Either way, no less than two men hit him with their unsecured bodies, and the van rolls another two - three -four times, the sound of gunshots muffled to the screeching of the metal frame hitting trees, rocks, and whatever has the misfortune of being between it and the end of its momentum.

It finds it eventually - Hannibal hanging from where he is tied down to the van wall, arm and face struck until bleeding, the pulse of his heart in his neck where the damaged doors open to reveal him and the unconscious bodies of the escort, and in turn, Chiyoh.

—

In 1904, Eric Weisz amazes the London audience of the Hippodrome Theater and the greater population of the United States as Harry Houdini, Vaudeville magician and illusionist, breaking free of handcuffs specially designed to be impossible to break. It takes him an hour. He goes on to integrate escapes into his routine for the remainder of his career, in varying difficulty and credibility, but always a good show.

Hannibal does not have an hour, nor an audience, but he does have restraints. It is only by the good grace of a bad night of sleep and the lingering fantasy that birds have more impact (*literal or otherwise*) on his life that he doesn't have more to escape from.

If Chiyoh is quick with her dispatch of the caravan, there is perhaps twenty minutes until the site is found. If slow or partial, ten. The accident feels as though it takes an eternity, but no sirens scream from the open door of the van. None approach with handguns drawn, insisting he put his hands up.

So Chiyoh is herself, as she has been from first stony introduction to teenaged co-conspirator, and does nothing without exacting grace and *timeliness*.

He must pass out briefly because while he is absolutely certain Chiyoh would pay an indescribable sum to slap him, he doesn't see it coming from behind the red lids of his eyes and the sway of his body against the van wall restraints.

It stings. It feels good that it stings.

(*You are alive. You may even be free.*)

"Have you been made stupid by the accident?" she asks, looking very grim with the thin set of her eyes and mouth, watching him for signs of distress.

Hannibal licks blood from between teeth and tongue, when he feels he has bitten it. He doesn't care to be upside-down still, but a woman as slight as Chiyoh can hardly unstrap him from where he is without dropping him a few feet if he's unconscious. He suspects she would pay another sum to do so, and entertains the idea before her practicality wins out.

Bless her, he thinks against the sting of injury surfacing from beneath the slap.

"I was made stupid by far less mundane things, but not today," he grates out with a small laugh, swallowing against a wave of nausea. "I can't express how…delighted I am to see you."

"You'll be less delighted if we do not move from here as soon as possible," she says, and pulls a hunting knife out from the pocket of a smart black camouflage windbreaker. Never without her outerwear, Hannibal notes with another pass of his tongue over the soreness of his mouth, and does his best to break his fall with the hand that has come free from the cuffs.

"I cannot solve every problem with a gun," she adds. "Sometimes I don't shoot and they stay away. Sometimes I shoot and they come running back."

Hannibal nods, and imagines what it's been like for her to share a household with Will. What an irritant *that* must have been.

"But you've managed a great many anyways," he smiles against the pain that strikes him palm and his shoulder, and kicks out a leg as soon as Chiyoh frees it from the bolt in the floor. "Recurring problems such as myself aside," he adds.

“I prefer nannying to this,” she replies without heat. “If you insist on finding new uses for me.”

Chiyoh pulls him up and steadies him on his feet - soft sneakers, white, not a trace of Hannibal to them - and gives him a brief moment to orient himself. “But in the meantime,” she hastily says, “I must take the idea of you somewhere else.”

“The idea?” Hannibal asks, rolling his ankles and probing at the bones of his arms and chest, content for the moment that he is shaken, stirred, but not scrambled.

She pulls a stack of clothes from a pile outside. Black shirt, black pants, black pullover, and an unused pair of work boots that she regrettably does not have socks for.

“Give me your jumpsuit and your shoes,” she says. “I have someone who needs to wear them.”

As soon as he is done, pulling sleeves and pant legs over broken cuffs and chains to be tucked into the sides of boots, Chiyoh very nearly pushes Hannibal across the bridge that only minutes before was subject to scrutiny, the dark blue-brown waters of the Patuxent River glimmering in the morning sunshine below them.

Hannibal only knows that it is this thanks to the green highway sign that remains stalwartly unbent and standing right before the rolling wreckage begins, and between two police cruisers that Hannibal thinks may have officers still in them - Schrodinger’s officers, judging by the broken glass of the passenger windows and Chiyoh’s frightening aptitude, with neither of them with enough time to spare to open the doors and find out if they are alive or dead. Hannibal mentally prepares for a future where he must take responsibility for these two, and imagines how that statement would go.

(*“Your Honor, I certainly **don’t** know how the rifle got there,” you would say from the witness stand, as though it were a broken vase instead of a very fine gun with jacketed hollow-point bullets strewn between wildflowers and roadside trash. “But recall there are people like me just leaving them casually across the Virginia countryside. Perhaps I have a twin in spirit on the Maryland side of the border doing much the same - paying it forward, as the saying goes. Shall we call it luck, and leave it at that?”*)

It turns out Chiyoh is full of surprises beyond being a terrifying shot today. Walking into the weeds and rubble of an old driveway, Hannibal spies an old pickup truck, and the round-eyed anxiousness of someone's face glancing out from the cab's rear window.

Jon Sekine looks a fair bit less like he's become the lord of the moon this morning, but instead the rabbit hidden in it - duct tape over his mouth keeps him from any shy retorts or humble asides that are meant to disarm. Chiyoh looks at him in a way that is not unlike the resentful glare of a cat that is inconvenienced. Hannibal supposes that isn't entirely off the mark - she was likely quite content with her newfound responsibilities prior to Jon's unfortunate article.

What a mess ambition made for her.

"Good morning, Jon," Hannibal says with a bright smile, wiping blood from his forehead and cheek. "I see you have met the family directly after all - and here I thought you were content to make judgments from afar. A penny for your thoughts this fine Monday morning?" he asks, and delights to see that yes, the young man's eyes *can* go wider.

—

Jon Sekine makes a very poor Hannibal Lecter, even in prison orange and white sneakers, a grey-blonde wig pulled over his scalp. Hannibal suggests this is because Jon Sekine lacks the bulk necessary to look like a hardened criminal, or posture to suggest he is predator instead of prey.

Chiyoh suggests as an alternative that this is because he is dead.

"Fair point," Hannibal concedes, not sorry to lose the living hostage, only sorry that the time they had together prior to the young man's wardrobe change was so short. Twenty minutes doesn't provide time for the kind of artistry Hannibal craves, but long enough for his brand of justice.

(*“Cheer up, Jon,” you tell him. “Maybe they’ll find you on the back nine of a nice golf course. Your usual readers will be able to find you there. I myself can’t be bothered to arrange it, but you’ll get the distinction of our professional connection regardless. Moving up in your career is what you wanted, yes?”*)

Hannibal adjusts the orange lapels, and a pair of sunglasses that do a reasonable job of hiding the yellowing whites of the eyes. Not a suit wearing devil on the stand, but few could be. The stains going from collar to toes don’t help the impression, but they do cheer Hannibal quite a bit.

“Where will you take him?” he asks Chiyoh, strapping her hunting knife to the belt loop of his pants, where it sits clumsily, tacky still with blood. He cannot ask for better - it is a tall order to provide a surgeon’s scalpel on such short notice, and rude to ask for family swords. He has no hidden workshop to do his fine arts, and any such homes he might have to perform to greater effect steal time in travel and performance to reach where he needs to get to.

“What do you consider the opposite of Wolf Trap?” Chiyoh asks in turn, and slams the truck door closed. She does not hesitate now any more than she does on the Verger Farm, and she does not tell him what she thinks.

True to herself, through and through.

She peels out of the driveway, one hand holding the limp head across from hers up as not to slouch. The tires churn up weeds and dandelion fluff, the golden light of the sun cutting through the tree canopy to send them along the northbound Clarksville Pike, opposite to Alana waiting at the stone steps of the mental hospital, presumably to the Canadian border.

Maybe just the Columbia Mall, where Will Graham would certainly prefer to die before voluntarily visiting. Hannibal supposes there is an LL Bean and pretzel store, so maybe not.

(*You will never be able to repay her, you realize, wading into the shallow waters of the Patuxent’s banks in the morning’s warmth. There are no castles or fortunes that are her equal, the only person to recognize you as what you are and still think you are an important animal in the ecosystem of her life. People raised by wolves love them. The wolves love them too.*)

—

It is forty miles, give or take a handful in a westwards or eastwards direction, to go from the town of Highland to Wolf Trap.

It is largely suburban, filled more so with worried middle class families who are unhappy to be informed a widely broadcast serial killer has escaped in their midst, even if last reported to be heading towards the Pennsylvania state line with an unknown female cooperator. This is hardly conducive to the effortless navigation to which Hannibal aspires, having driven these streets many a time prowling for his prey. Neighborhood watch signs feel slightly less humorous when running on the fumes of a bad night of sleep, a fracture that threatens to be a full break with each venture back into deeper water, and what would undoubtedly be a severe concussion if Hannibal had the means to check.

He opts to head westward up the river for a number of additional miles, swimming awkwardly with a breaststroke that suffers from the fractured collarbone, but works the deep hurt of whiplash out of neck and limbs. Hannibal has heard from acquaintances in the past that he should check out the Brighton Dam Azalea Garden anyway, and what better time than now when they are all undoubtedly in bloom, and it's on the way?

***Open daily from 9 am to 7 pm!*** A sign cheerily announces, celebrating the municipal waste system's idea of victory over their public perception. The bright spill of pink, white, and purple from the neighboring forest cheers Hannibal in the flowers' irrepressible cheer, unable to have their day at all ruined by his brisk jogging from the river's edge down to the main road. Hannibal is not above picking a small branch from one, creamy and blushing gold at its center like eggs.

He thinks of Beatrice, his very own nest-treasure that he has never seen as anything other than a suggestion of in the inkjet printout of her debut article, who fate has at last deemed him worthy of seeing.

His imagination returns with the branch tucked in his pocket, a druid's wand that returns his magic to him - if she would be fair, or pink cheeked as Mischa had been.

Would she know who he is, born to know who she belongs to, or cry to be met with a stranger? Would Will give him the chance to hold her, or would he be more guarded, the more experienced and capable of the two of them for drying tears and drawing out smiles? Will he feel the way he thinks he ought to, magnetically drawn and bonded to her?

(*As you are to Will, struck by his first drawn-out frown and smile alike?*)

( *Surely you must if she is made of the same things as him.* )

His feet strike the asphalt and pavement of the streets in some of these passing hours by necessity, weaving between drainages of tract homes and parks, wiping his face clean with fountain water, walking where necessary to draw less attention.

—

Forty miles felt like a pittance, straight from the jaws of a police van in the sunny cheer of a late morning in spring.

By late-afternoon in the growing humidity of an approaching front, it is a great country splitting him from the fantasy of the driveway to the farmhouse and the commuter communities of the Tri-City area. Black clothing forgives a great many things, like the ample amount of blood that he is likely riddled with, but not the chafe of the cuffs that center him in the urgency of being chased.

The prison socks predictably forgive nothing, and slip down his feet as a fine garnish to the day.

His kingdom for a sensible unremarkable sedan, Hannibal thinks, eyes crossing the expanse of a high school parking lot, and more seriously again at a Park and Ride near to a senior home. The nausea of being struck in the head by grown men that refuse to wear their seatbelts in the one scenario they needed it begins to catch up with him again, with the high of escape beginning to recede. The paranoia of passing ambulances, fire trucks, and the occasional municipality officer rides alongside it.

Forty miles, typically a modest twelve hours or walking at a brisk pace, turned into eighteen because a car is too suspicious. A car puts him somewhere specific, when Hannibal Lecter should be wild and northbound, everywhere and nowhere, cruising somewhere between southern New York and the long expanse of the Great Lakes.

Until the sun goes down and the moon rises to its rightful, unattainable height, Hannibal walks.

He rests once at the edge of the Potomac once, for the novelty of it, finally crossing into the state where his daughter's birth certificate comes from, and his arrest is finally achieved. He returns to the water again, long-legged and careful-footed as the other fowl are, calling and crying at his passage. The clouds come to crowd the moon, and this slows him more than he already has been.

Hannibal rests again where it meets the Difficult Run River, where the backwoods trail will lead him into the forest surrounding Wolf Trap. A drizzle taps at him, cloaking and uncloaking the sky in intervals. He wipes the exhaustion from his eyes.

When they open again, Hannibal thinks here, on the rocky outcropping of Mather Gorge, he sees the silhouette of the black bird that bodies him in his sleep as powerfully as any guard ragdolling in a multiple casualty crash and dash.

Hannibal cannot know of course - the night does him no favors except to keep him safe in the overgrowth surrounding the waterways and walking paths. It could be a drifter with a predilection for rainy walks. It could be a metal post. But it feels appropriate that it could be his unlooked for helper, his pushy wind of change. He owes it a thank you, and probably a physical therapy bill. But mostly a thank you.

It also stands to reason that he has hit his head many times, and that he is probably one more good smack away from thinking he is a stork as well.

*Migratory creatures, both of us*, Hannibal sighs wordlessly across the rippling water, and its long figure standing proudly over the roar of water coming to fall between limestone in the

Virginia Chute, clacking his beak in the secret language of dancers with swords for mouths. He watches it from the slick mound of a rock, feeling the hours and grateful for them.

“Good hunting,” Hannibal wishes it, no matter what it is.

If it is the great brute that throws him to the prison floor, Hannibal owes it his thanks that he is able to escape. If it is not, then all that matters is that he likes that it could be, and compels its inky black wings to carry him through the darkness of the early morning.

“*Buona fortuna, compagno di viaggio. Gero skrydžio,* ” he says aloud with no concern of being heard, a man of very little faith, but great confidence in the endurance of things that are meant to be known and seen.

—

Hannibal has memorized the approach to Will’s house from almost every direction. He has driven them many times, with countless intentions. This is the first time he has come from the undeveloped land across from the main road, a safe distance from any eyes, but close enough to follow its snaking line in the dawn.

The morning cool is and blue with proper rain, but the water no longer bothers him and his shaky legs, hair and clothing matted down - Hannibal doesn’t know if there’s been a time he has been dry since his long day and night began. He wipes the rain from his eyes, and crosses the asphalt, listening to the drops hit the leaves above, dark green and full in the crowns of the trees. There is no evidence that the law lies in wait here, but it is with great trepidation that he pulls himself from bushes and brambles to the gravel before the farmhouse, prepared to turn away if necessary.

It is and isn’t as he remembered it.

The house remains a cheery white and yellow, twin to his azalea branch, the filigree corbels of the porch posts a welcome sight. The brambles in the low fall to either side of the driveway, that he has likely spent the night being scratched and battered by in the unlit trails of the countryside, are indeed rosy and winking their spring eyes, but far darker than the ones

he knows. Hannibal is delighted by them, their bruise-dark petals gathering water to them in little clear gems. It is right that they are venous and thorned as they are.

The exciting assortment of graffiti which was unknown to him before now bothers Hannibal, for its lack of creativity and its lack of skill. How long has it been there? Who was bold enough to steal their way up to the doorway and try their fate? Will would be upset by it, proud of his house as he is. He would also be annoyed by how grievously misshapen the skull and crossbones that decorates the door are.

Not nearly enough arts funding in the public school system, Hannibal thinks to himself, and contemplates in perfect seriousness and absurd exhaustion if it is too late to create a local endowment.

But there is no sign of Will's annoyance, at least not from the entrance to the property - merely his car, pulled tight to the side of the house and all of the windows shut tight and covered.

When Hannibal draws closer to the front door, he sees evidence in a literal sign. Hannibal reads it in the dry tone Will saves for lectures and clever asides, written in extremely utilitarian block letters:

***Ringing the doorbell will be construed as an act of violence, and responded to accordingly.***

*There you are,* Hannibal thinks with a brush of a cold hand to the printer paper, held aloft by packing tape. *They can't take the fight out of the dog*, he smiles softly. It's reasonable to think Will has fought off disaster chasers, curious eyes, and well wishers alike, even if he cannot chase off the aspiring street artists. Private property is only as private as one's ability to maintain its borders, and Will appears to have accepted a tactical retreat to the inside of the house. It's more than likely that the doorbell itself is a nuisance for a single man with a very young baby to care for alone.

(*Not alone. Not so long as you can help, the trees and the proud sticks and branches and reeds of the surrounding woods creating a bower for the two of you to hide in, until another can be made. Wagon wheels are for travel, as surely as they are for storks and you will find*

*one. It is amongst the first things that you learn and come to trust, a man who was a boy who never settled in one place for long - there is always somewhere to go.*)

Hannibal listens more, circling the house, looking for disturbances at the edges of the field, and views into the house. He watches the windows for light and sound. He tries to peer past the blinds where he knows the bed will lie in shambles, and hopefully wrapped inside of it, the proud mussed head of one Will Graham.

He receives instead silence - no dog barks, no curious nails on the floor. Will may not be here after all, even with the car still in the drive. His chest feels tight at the thought, that he doesn't know where to find him if he isn't.

Hannibal tries something he hasn't since the day he met Will Graham.

He asks for permission to come into the house at all.

Hannibal knocks on the window pane with a sore hand, as quietly as he can. "*Will*," he whispers.

(*Wake up, you want to say. Let me in - this is home in a way that other places aren't and you need to know what changed and what stayed the same, you want to say. Show you what you and Will have been given, what you had wished for in the lines of his face and equations and memories you only half-remember that try to trivialize something that cannot be made to answer to logic. Wake up, and tell you that a thousand hungry faces watched the two of you through the crowd of the media and law enforcement, and that he'll still open the door because he is as magnetically drawn to every place you've ever been as you are to his.*)

Hannibal swallows, tapping again.

"*Will,* " he stresses to the opposite window nearest to the fireplace, the bookshelves, the fly-tying kit that Hannibal doesn't know if he ever gets back, the chair that he's made himself comfortable in many times before. This glass pane is the loose one, original to the house and wavy with age, and he knows from his previous exploration that it lifts from its rails with ease. He knows because he meddles with it many times like he might have use for it, the

habit of a man more used to sliding in unseen than as the person who was once given a house key to feed the dogs and check the mail.

Hannibal lifts it now, apologetic in his heart but impatient to be out of the open and the rain, the scabbing tops of his hands aching and splitting to drag it upwards and out. He likes being right, the assurance that he can anticipate *some* things still.

Hannibal crawls in, and over the bookshelf.

But he is not greeted by Will, by means of exceptional violence or otherwise. He notes the emptiness of the room, the clumsy array of boxes hiding their contents. Piles of neatly folded clothes and blankets stand in watchful stacks, waiting for their own turn to be put away.

No Will in the bed, though recently mussed. On closer observation, there is the familiar hiss of water from down the hallway - the bathroom then. Will is nothing if not an industrious taker of showers and baths.

(*You contemplate telling him once in the early days of your acquaintance of the efficacy of hyperthermic bathing on the chronically depressed, but keep it to yourself. Nobody likes to hear that their self-care methods are biologically driven need to strangle a happy feeling out of oneself somewhere, and besides, you become conditioned to that terrible spiced soap and aftershave he uses each time.*)

New to Hannibal, and presumably to the house is a giant cedar chest, something nearly identical to what his mother kept in the hallway filled with countless beautiful things, and likely had been kept there since long before either Will or him had been a thought (*or dearly shared wish*) in *their* parents' eyes. Pretty florets and patterns chase the edges of its lid, carved and rounded smooth at the edges by the hands of its owners and time. Something to keep quilts in, or photo albums and other dear things meant to be preserved from rot.

Hannibal absently runs fingers along the top grain of its lid, considering.

It's a massive and fussy thing, heavy, painted in places with animals and stars. It's not something he would expect Will to like at all. Rather, it is not something Hannibal would

expect Will to *want* or have the means to find, but Will has a pervasive tendency to inherit rather than choose. It would not be so strange for it to be gifted to him to keep safe, and him to like it because he jealously guards things in his keep.

From the corner of his vision on the floor, the wave of something small, and yellow.

Speaking of fussy things.

If he were to be asked, Hannibal doesn't know he could ever envision the first time he sees a child belonging to him. It's so outside the purview of the life he's chosen, it's comical to think any god in their right mind would ever allow it, proving that if there is one, he is either something of a neglectful parent himself, or has completely unknowable values and everyone saying otherwise is in denial that they're all careening through space with no rhyme or reason.

Not that Hannibal is a pessimist, he thinks and kneels to the floor to look over the edge of the crib there.

Not that Hannibal cannot see the complicated beauty of a tiny leg wearing footed pajamas, held together by a million small things and only made possible by a billion others occurring in the background - the largest of which is a quiet, earnest hope.

( *And that at its start is a very small thing too, laid and tended to until it can be made big by what a huge emotion it shakes out of you*.)

Round face. Dark grey-blue eyes. Barely there wisps of blonde around the edges of smooth forehead and button ears, all set like a pearl in the comfort of a crib. A baby is a baby is a baby, thousands born every day, and still Hannibal is surprised to know, bone-deep, that this one is his and that it means something.

It truly does.

“*Buongiorno, bella uccelina,”* Hannibal whispers to Beatrice, and the beguiling charm of her daisy-bright arms and legs waving with the first flutterings of wanting up, working their way free of the swaddle. Hannibal reaches to take her up, too entranced to care about his own messy hands.

Beatrice does nothing to make it easier, kicking outwards and balling her fists and reach to rub with carefully cut nails at her face. He pulls them away and settles them again in the folds of her blanket with a delicacy he has not made use of since his last surgery - for no reason than he feels surely that is how daughters should be held.

It’s reassuring - she is moving, autonomous, grouchy as her father. She is not a throwaway line in a greeting card that reads as a joke. She is whole, with ten fingers and what feels to be ten toes from what he can feel from the closed fabric feet of her onesie, the ephemera of her existence scattered across the floor of Will’s house with more consideration granted to its packing than anything else Will Graham owns.

“Good morning, good morning,” he breathes into the fine light hairs of her scalp to quiet her light huffing at being moved, and the soft smell of laundry, and the indescribable scent that babies have that should be impossible at this age and as she was delivered. “I see you were left to sleep a little longer,” he reasons, hushed and gentle. “My apologies for waking you.”

She nods her head into the tenderness between chin and shoulder, oblivious to the rare thing an apology is from him, or Hannibal’s injury that the roundness of her head jostles, or that injuries and hurts exist, or the impossibility of her existence at all.

Her fingers pry at the collar of the sweater there, and the sweat, river, and rain dampness of it, with no thought of what Hannibal’s life before Will and her were like at all.

(*“All your hard work has paid off,” your mother had said, and you, proud and hateful thing that you are in your dirty clothes, your blistering feet, your gnawing stomach, listening to water hit the shower wall in a house you were afraid you had seen the last of and could never know the framework of again, let yourself be six again and see what your diligence has brought you.*)

—

Hannibal can’t say for sure how long he sits at the edge of the chest, listening to the restful silence of an early Tuesday morning and how a baby’s nails scratch against the fibers of fabric, or how remarkably expert they are at finding the one vulnerable spot of skin on his neck to also scratch at. The sound of this eventually becomes disrupted by the sounds of wordless discontent, the threat of crying winding up like a pitch.

*Hungry*, Hannibal thinks to himself. As her sire often is as well.

He can help with this, if Will needs a moment longer to himself.

The kitchen shows the same chaos as the living room with an assortment of things being thrown into boxes lining the counters, and several already sealed. He holds Beatrice with an awkward one-armed grip, waltzing his way through this, finding the absence of the dogs sad somehow - the end of the house's era.

But Will has always been an exceptional planner, even if not as prolific one as Hannibal himself - two bottles sit in readiness, formula portioned out, only waiting for water and to be warmed.

Hannibal stares at them for a moment in hesitation, and considers if he should wait for Will.

Beatrice squawks again, declaring this unacceptable.

Hannibal heats the water with trepidation that he did not think he could feel anymore, before assuring himself that he has two PhDs, twenty or so years of hands-on medical experience, twenty-six official counts of premeditated first-degree murder, has fed several hundred people with the spoils of all three pursuits, and the knowledge that humans without the capacity for any of those things have been managing just fine to care for small babies for the entirety of the holocene epoch.

How hard could it be?

Very, it seems on the first try, battling to find the right temperature. Like any skill, it is learned - he will ask next time, as the new resident of this discipline, and Will the grizzled attending.

They make their way back to the living room, and the steady seat that the chest provides. Even without cushions or pillows to soften it, Hannibal's feet and mind aren't fresh, and he is glad of somewhere to rest.

In the seconds of exhaustion that overtake him between convincing Beatrice to take the bottle and with nothing to ground him, it's hard to picture the reality of any of this.

He wonders if maybe his mind might have not slipped clear out the side of his head and is actually strewn along the highway south of Highland in a mess of cerebral fluid, and he is experiencing a very vivid hallucination in the seconds before consciousness decides to cheerfully draw the program of life to a close. Gosling of a daughter aside, his escape is hardly fraught with the peril that it deserved, other than the possibility of drowning himself, or presenting his person to the wrong suburban shopping mall.

(*You correct yourself: there was also a 2.75% chance that you die from a subcranial hematoma following the fallout of your police escort, but you are choosing to think positively in the spirit of returning to your eternal misanthropist of a beloved, and it's not like you could cheerfully commandeer an MRI machine while passing through the Bethesda area without adding several more people to your verifiable murder count.*)

(*Not that you're opposed - the National Institutes of Health **did** refuse you a grant once - just that you're on a time crunch, and it's **impractical** to stop.*)

But Beatrice doesn't allow much time to reflect on this - she changes from content to distracted early and often, new mind working at the puzzle of this person that has changed her morning routine. It is a joy when she is busy with her breakfast, but a challenge when she is not, small enough still to be held easily but old enough now to want to move away. Another way she is more like Will Hannibal supposes - unable to concentrate on a good meal when mentally stuck on something different from her routine.

Also like Will, Hannibal watches her with a smile like it is no imposition or insult at all, fascinated.

It is because of this he misses the shower being turned off, until the anxious slap of wet feet on the hallway floor tells Hannibal that the heart of the home is returned once more.

Hannibal has not quite dared to anticipate what Will would do. He does not pretend to know him perfectly, even as he feels certain he is the closest someone has come to doing so. For the first time since his sentence is served, no matter that Will Graham is the only person he has wanted to get back to since the icy gravel in the drive scraped his shins and knees, Hannibal is afraid.

Would Will be wistful as he was in the Uffizi Gallery, or angry for the responsibility heaped on him? Would he feel uncomfortable at Hannibal's (*rough, bloody, unyielding, avaricious*) hands taking Beatrice from her bed? Had he ever entertained that maybe someday Hannibal would like to, or had Will grown accustomed to the image of his great monstrosity contained, and Will's own with it? Having a baby changes many things, but not some, and he would gladly kill anyone that jeopardizes his happiness, so long as it was not Will.

So he may as well relax, Hannibal swallows around exhaustion and that small hope again, flaring to life.

"We're not very hungry this morning it seems," he says to the slim white of Will's body in the periphery but keeps his eyes to the baby, suddenly tight-throated and happy no matter the outcome. He wipes a dribble of formula from Beatrice's cheek, grabbing for the nearest soft thing to complete the task. Suns and stars, he notes, printed on a twilit blue. The humblest heaven for her to shine bright against.

She turns away in protest, though at what this time, Hannibal doesn't dare guess. He tickles the side of a pink cheek, carving the line of it into memory so that he doesn't doubt it again.

"New hands make for different meals," he says as a way of explanation, watching her blink and look for Will, rallying for that cry she's kept waiting. "I tried to call before stepping in," he adds as the silly thing it is, tapping at windows, waiting to be invited in like a vampire instead of a man, "as I saw the sign on the door and thought it sounded quite sincere in its

aspirations to cause bodily harm, but you were in the shower and it would be rude to interrupt."

But Will, who is himself, and is changed, simply lets him know what he must do next.

"It's getting too cold," he says with a voice caught in his throat, and like Beatrice, looks like he has been primed for a good cry himself.

Today, Will wears a different outfit than the one Hannibal has taken relief in seeing. This isn't *exactly* the man who comes to court dressed to match, who stares down attorneys and onlookers like he dares them to guess at anything about him. Nor is it the one that snarls from his comforts and turns inwards to avoid being hurt, that Hannibal hoped had gone with the sailboat, and the bullet wounds, and the buzzing of the saw across his forehead.

This is very clearly the man who packs the house, and sets out food, and prays the day rises on better times from beneath the warm, steaming fall of the showerhead. The one he is with or without Hannibal. He is tired, and bedraggled in a tatty robe that has likely hung on the back of the door since the day Will signed the contract to purchase the house. Dark eye circles take his face captive, the blue-green-brown of them still as sharp and bright as ever but adrift now in barely held tears.

So too is this the person who's persevered through many weeks more of hurts than Hannibal, sheltered from the law, but never from the slings and arrows of the public, or the restless nights. Hannibal wonders if the stork bothered to break his collarbone too, so that they could match, or to see who keeps the wish, but it is as clean and lovely as Hannibal last saw it before setting teeth to it in their passion, carving initials that he and a bite mark analysis could attest to but fortunately no one asked him for.

( *And you both keep the wish anyway - it was for him, but it was also for you.* )

Hannibal doesn't know if he could ever want another, no matter what mood or face Will picks each day.

He raises a hand to Will's cheek anyway, feeling dark eyed and tired as well. He jealously traces the water and curling hair there, enjoying the tremble beneath in its wake, wanting to be just as close.

"Then we'll heat it up," he says like that is at all what they are talking about. The urgency that compels him to his knees at the end of the drive in the snow just months before compels him to the honest response - to carefully press his mouth to Will's, and fervently wish things to be as they are now.

How wonderfully different from the bland halls of the prison, or even the rich ones of the brownstone house, Florentine apartments, and many towers of Lecter Castle. How rich instead Hannibal is to have somewhere to belong, and not just come home to, and every small tremor from Will's lips and his own becoming the magnetism of the world, telling him where he must be in its unknowable but perfect time.

—

When he lays down to rest, Hannibal is assured that he cannot fall from the bunk. There is no bunk to fall from - just the bed that he remembers as being one of his last to be in. He confirms that there appears to be no massive black animals waiting at the end of the drive either, though he does not admit that he has looked out between the shades for expressly that purpose.

He is still slightly damp with the results of a day and a night roughing it, insofar as having to walk through suburbia and wade at the edges of stretches of waterways with very precious little parks and bike trails can be described as rough. The broken cuffs have chafed at his ankles and wrists, but demand no rush so long as he is able to more freely and the bolt cutters are packed tight. Will admits to not knowing where they are, and starts rustling around in search for them, but goes to lie down with Hannibal with little argument when it becomes clear that his memory has failed him.

The cuffs are inconsequential, now that he is here.

Hannibal takes a pair of socks to wear from the many erratic piles at Will's behest, who is quoted as insisting there is nothing worse than wet feet like he didn't do a stint in prison, or

have his head sawn open by his bedfellow. The great satan, wet feet - the penultimate corporal punishment, bane of Will Graham's existence.

Hannibal thinks that's very gracious if wildly short-sighted of him, and traces a thumb over the scar healing at Will's hairline.

The bulk of Will lays across from him between Beatrice and the floor, their hands loosely clasped, her kicking furiously and unbothered by the gravitas of their reunion. Also their first *meeting* as a family, if Hannibal is to be pedantic, which he often is, no matter that this was all violently wanted and seen in his mind's eye in a hundred different ways.

Pulling the covered foot of Beatrice's clothing back into place, and offering a pacifier that she insists will be everywhere other than her mouth and Will insists she will continue to spit out no matter his persistence, Hannibal feels like it should have always been.

"Just going to lie down for a few minutes," Will says in a grumbling whisper over the sound of the rain, and the blankets rustling between them under the baby's weight, eyes closed to the scene. "Before we run out of time."

"And then the world comes back into the picture?" asks Hannibal, come to lay inert and heavy beneath the warmth of the quilt. He hasn't forgotten it. He simply must take this fragment of time for himself before letting it back in. "Jack Crawford to haunt your door, the vultures of the press to ask if you know anything?"

Will snorts, and opens an eye to look at Hannibal. "That too, but mostly because Bea didn't eat. She gets too angry to sleep after not eating. Very into her schedule and meal planning. Takes everyone out with her, kind of like you."

"Kind of like me," Hannibal smiles into the side of the pillow, eyes closing against his desire to keep watch. The same Will, and a different one with new worries and routines. Hannibal will have to learn those too.

# your turn: how to be an adult

Chapter Notes

Late, but not forgotten.

As of this chapter being posted, the final chapter is written and is being edited for final upload next week on Thanksgiving Day - some edits have been made throughout the text of the story to bring it all home and clean up a couple loose ends, so if you find yourself needing a refresher, now is a good time to do it as everything will be complete very shortly.

Enjoy, and thanks. <3

Will doesn't have many memories that he can look back on and definitively say were good or bad ones.

Some, yes, but not most. His history and impressions of family are particularly smudged. Will doesn't blame anyone for that other than himself - not because he has done anything to deserve that, but for the simple truth that life is complicated.

He cannot throw all blame at his father's door, or his absent mother who there is no door to throw it to. No small amount of blame can be thrown at being made to revisit the concept after fucking his on-and-off…whatever the hell Hannibal is supposed to be, losing a fight with a giant black bird, and being made to cohabitate with a woman that once thought throwing him off a cliff and sniping him from Italian rooftops was a valid form of behavioral correction, but that's *also* complicated, and not the whole picture.

His empathy is his own, and empathy doesn't stop at the edges of crime scenes, or serial killers, or courthouses full of the self-important law and masses that want to see it served. Anything that's impactful has a feeling, smell, and flavor, and he learns to re-read those things as he gets older.

Will allows that many of the days after meeting Hannibal are objectively and verified-by-third-party awful. Context is important, but the context is his accidental and ill-advised doctor and lover has an appetite for spectating and creating opportunities to do that, and not in a fun, kinky way. Unless of course, the kink is medical malpractice and the fun is forcing tedious meals on the unsuspecting population, made possible by the prior kink.

There's difficult childhoods that make difficult adults, and then there's whatever Hannibal is and had.

(*Control. The loss of it. The bone-grinding force of an ungentle hand taking it back. The acceptance of its loss a second time when it becomes clear he cannot have you if he doesn't loosen his fingers.*)

(*You smile. They are very loose now, relaxed in the wrinkled coverlet, brushing the cotton edges of a swaddle.*)

It's easy lately to forget that Will has a whole life before Hannibal. He was made what he is long before Jack Crawford makes his acquaintance, and their introduction possible. His memory, no matter how many times the shape and color of it is redrawn, is as full and vast as any palace of Hannibal's, and shades in the lines of Will's ideas of what family is.

One of the best remembered - a summer night in July. Bedtime is strictly at 8:30 pm, as though the cosmos opened up and declared this to be the official bedtime of children of elementary school age, and brooks no argument for summer break.

Will is five, maybe six, maybe just on the edge of turning six like that is an important date. It is to a five year old, Will allows - unfathomably large, where every year before is a greater percentage than the last. A literal sixth of his life, only recently lived, where that number to Will as an adult makes him feel time is very short after all.

Beatrice has not even lived a half-year of that. How vast six must be to her.

Young Will is restless in this memory. He rails against the injustice of the sun coming through the windows. Curfew is before the sun goes down, his daddy always says, and here it is, standing above the tree line and the early flicker of the street lights who only know clocks, not seasons. The neighbor kids are allowed out when they'd like, and normally he is too, but Beau is home tonight, and the rules are reinstated with the sound of the TV down the hall.

Will tosses and turns in bed, too warm. July in Louisiana is thoughtlessly humid and oppressive with and without the sun when the breeze doesn't blow in from the gulf. His head buzzes with the frustration of little curling hairs sticking to his neck, the sheets sticking to his legs. The window cooler rumbles in the window. People clap and laugh from the speakers in the living room, tinny and buzzing with the tubes of the television.

He eventually stands - almost six, too *old* now to be put away in the evenings like a baby - and sneaks down the hall to hide behind the shadow of the dark orange couch, golden in sunset, highlighted in the white-blue of the screen as a show host smiles in straight white teeth to his audience. Another fan roars away from the corner of the room, not a cooler because they have only one and it's Will's, and Beau Graham lays sprawled on the cushions to make the most of it.

(*A context that is good: your father lets you have the better room of three available to you - two bedrooms, and the square that falls between them and the kitchen that can't be rightly called a living room anymore than all the other spaces you draw breath in. A context that is bad: he cannot afford any alternatives. He cannot because he is one of those difficult adults. He cannot because he is born to another one of his own, and you might be made of the same things, and that is your legacy of family no matter your context or age.*)

"You outta bed?" his father grumbles, slack handed grip on the neck of a beer bottle tightening to put it aside. It sweats with condensation that Beau puts to his neck to wipe the sweat off.

"You're outta bed," Will mumbles to the couch, fingernails scratching at the fabric. "Don't you have t'sleep too?"

"Sure do," says his father with a gruff smile. "Seems kinda crooked for me t' make you and then go on  and do somethin' else then, isn't it?" he adds, more talking to himself than Will. He does that a lot - say one thing brooking no argument, only to be sorry to be the mean one an hour later.

“Too hot?” he asks Will when they sit in the moment’s silence, Will crouched on the floor, Beau slouched with long feet pushed into aging brown carpet. It doesn’t take an empathy disorder to guess at that.

Will nods, half-expecting to be told that his father is too, and they’ll have to make due.

Beau instead stands wordlessly from the couch, floor creaking under his weight.

Will thinks he is maybe in his mid-thirties, too large to sneak like Will down the hall. That his mid thirties are akin to having lived a thousand years before he has a son, that the span of time has made him forget to be kind to Will who thinks six should be old enough to decide when he goes to bed, when the sun is gone and maybe the light won’t irritate his eyes and dignity where the humidity and the sweat and sheets cannot be stopped. He prepares to be guided by careful but very weathered hands to *go on, get on back there* , but his father instead goes to the little kitchen with the laminate counters and beat up wood cabinets and pulls ice pops from the freezer that are jewel-bright in a summer evening’s glow.

Will chooses blue - raspberry, it claims, but is more sugar than fruit, and the only actual flavor is cold no matter what year he remembers it.

Beau chooses one too - maybe peach, maybe orange judging by the color - and puts it against his neck as readily as the condensation from the beer, and bites it open with his teeth. Will smiles his secretive own way, chin tucked to his neck, fox eyed and shy and does the same.

At the time, Will thinks his father does it because Will likes to open them that way, and it’ll be funny, a joke.

It’s only three decades removed, Will in his own mid-thirties, that he can think of it as an honest expression of Beau Graham being a bit of a child himself that accidentally inhabits an adult body, like all the adults before him, opening treats with mean teeth because scissors would be easier but this works.

—

(*A context that is bad: the stretch of years makes no one into the unshakeable ideal of an adult. Your father survived raising you in the shoestring margins between working class and poverty, barely any wiser than you were. You will likely never attain this title, even if you do the title of father. Or mother, depending on what documents you ask.*

*A context that is good: you, a father, are ok to feel this way - not nearly as wise, or as certain as you thought you'd be by now, just trying to keep up. That things will be ok even with the early bedtime because you can salvage your uncertainty with something simple like frozen colored water.*

*A context that is reassuring, reaching across the sheets and the fluttering of Beatrice's legs that will not hold still even if you are tired and poisoned with anxiousness, and Hannibal nearly half dead from a day's worth of evasive maneuvers and balancing his need for control against the chaos of existence:*

*You have someone to help you, to share that contracting of the universe from huge and slow in its vastness, to small and very fast in its shrinking accessibility to you and the time you have in it. It doesn't make you afraid that your life is becoming a pinpoint defined by what's around it, because now you know what to focus on, and to let the fluid uncertainty of the moment's importance pass.*

*All the same, you know this moment is good.*)

—

There's a certain glamour to sleeping in on a Tuesday morning, house, baby, and partner-in-crime-and-accidental-procreation a mess but softened at the edges by rain.

It sounds like something normal people do - call out sick, crawl back under the covers, and pretend they're not delaying the inevitable. Probably no one in the eastern seaboard would describe Will Graham or Hannibal Lecter as normal, but that doesn't stop them from participating like a visiting foreigner, observing a strange if wholesome local custom.

Will settles as best he can, who can't deny his heart is high up in his throat, nervously counting time as though he might forget this is finite.

There's so much that can happen to take this away - the marshals, Jack Crawford, the Vergers, Will's own infallible sense of doom that will not be stopped even for the joy of a singular moment. If storks have an ounce of decency, they hopefully skipped giving Beatrice his anxiety.

He tries to sink into the sheets anyway, head itchy from sleeping on damp hair, eyes itchy from trying to disguise his weepy tiredness. Will's heart resists calming for anything, so he instead focuses on his bedfellows, small and large, and hopes to forget it's there.

Next to him, Hannibal's shoulder and chest rise and fall with slow, warm breaths.

Will smiles a little, counting them. Hannibal struggled against the pull of sleep for as long as he could, not so unlike Beatrice in a snit, but even the greatest machines require rest to operate efficiently.

Taking the analogy further, if Hannibal is to be a machine, Will supposes he would be a grain thresher who just happens to be out of gas, if one replaces "grain" with "people", and ignores that's not an agricultural demographic that requires specialized equipment, and a fair bit more like a war crime. Not that Hannibal isn't an enthusiast of both, Will thinks with a snort, and watches the hand that has touched him in every kind of violence go still and careful, from cupping the side of Beatrice's head to softly open and forgotten.

Will lets out a long breath of his own. How aggravating, to lay here now and forced to remember that the *other* father of his child is a marvel of destruction when in the mood.

How happy he is to see him anyway, for as long as he can.

His phone buzzes from the floor next to the hope chest, forgotten but never far away.

Reality demands relevancy, likely in text messages from Alana, Jack, and anyone who is stupid enough to think that Will has been anything but deadly serious that he'll probably murder the next person to try to get into the house. Hannibal gets a one-time exclusion, because he always seems to, but that's besides the point.

"*Mr. Graham, would you like to comment on the escape of Hannibal Lecter?"* they'll inevitably ask with a boldness in email and politely worded calls that they don't have in real life, and Will can be expected to deny responsibility or interest rather than tell them to eat shit and die.

*"Mr. Graham, are you afraid for your life? Are you afraid he won't be caught? Are you afraid that he* ***will*** *?"* they'll ask, looking for a hook, and the answer is **yes** to everything, and they will interpret that in whatever way they like, and none of it will matter. *"Mr. Graham, Mr. Graham, Mr. Graham."*

(*"Stay with me, Will," says Hannibal, and you wonder where else you would go in a bad memory, and in the safe embrace of a good one now.*)

Will pulls a hand down his chin, and rolls to his side, favoring the hard lines of Hannibal's exhausted face with a fondness he would have sworn by his left kidney would never exist.

The baby still has to be fed. The laundry has to be cleaned, folded, and packed. The serial killer in the bed shaken a few times for the satisfaction of seeing him wake up bewildered and sleep deprived to the sound of Beatrice shrieking, which Will thinks is only fair after all this time he's had to do it.

"Time to try again, right Bea?" he asks the baby, who cares even less than Hannibal and Will about the events outside this room. She is fortunate to not be old to understand that things happen without her in attendance, and knows nothing of dread. Blankets, bottles, toys, clothes, all tenderly tucked away in the wooden chest, and the boxes scattered around, and non-existent until they are pulled out once more. If she cannot see it in the simple context of this space, it cannot happen.

—

The easiest solution to Will's immediate problem is to just call people back and respond to their (*probable and reasonable*) concerns. Check in. Give assurances. Make excuses. Euphemistically shoot the shit, as it were.

People who were disinclined to forgive him an autoimmune illness have proven to have an amazingly hypocritical capacity to forgive the trials of single parenting in the first months of infancy. He just has to make the effort to let them know to buy him and Hannibal a few hours to sort out where they'll meet up. What the future looks like. If Freddie is imminently coming back by.

*Ugh,* Will thinks with irritation, walking into the kitchen and beginning the ritual of warming Beatrice's second breakfast.

Beatrice agrees by taking a handful of shirt and letting her head loll backwards until Will gently tips it back against his shoulder. She does that more these days - stress test the little bones of her neck, and Will's patience. Will shrugs, shaking and testing the bottle's warmth with the back of his hand, and tries to not groan when she throws her head again into the tingling mass of nerves that make up his shoulder these days post-shootings.

He must do *something* if he doesn't want people pulling into the drive and asking where the regional favorite psychopath is hiding, and that Will had best make it sound like he has not ardently hoped it was possible, or that he's in need of anything remotely resembling help.

It's this that gets Will's anxiety back online after shorting out at seeing Hannibal's face. It's highly improbable that they don't try and push him into some sort of witness protection, or post a patrol if they haven't already. It's hardly like Hannibal didn't let every person with half a brain know that he is obsessed with Will Graham, or that he has a terrifying talent for showing up at his house at all hours with all sorts of questionable intentions.

If only he had some context for the past twenty-four hours, he sighs and shakes the warmed bottle again, waiting for it to cool a tiny bit more. Maybe it's best that he doesn't. Nothing to lie about if he doesn't know.

Will rolls his neck, shuffling his arm full of baby to a position better suited for a meal. Beatrice accepts his offering with the enthusiasm of someone made to wait for service at a restaurant: offended, contrarian, but ultimately hungry enough to accept anything that comes her way. Complaints will be launched at her previous host, but she eats, *enthusiastically* this time, which means they might get the luxury of an hour to plan in relatively concentrated silence.

*They*, Will thinks again, and lets a brief moment of relief sweep and bolster him, staring at the glass front of his phone. For however many hours that lasts.

Will selects a name to call back - the most relevant, since he must choose.

Of the many calls he has received, more than half are simply Jack, who never bothers to leave voicemails. Jack wastes no time in letting him know how incredibly wrong he is - in not answering the phone, and in allowing himself to feel anything other than the dizzying heights of panic. Standard operating procedure for Jack Crawford, but something that Will finds he really didn't miss about working with him.

He listens to the ringing of the phone against his ear, hoping no one will answer.

Alas.

"You're lucky I'm not there yet," Jack is quick to snap when Will calls and is answered within the first ring.

"Why, is Uncle Jack on the way to visit?" Will quips before he thinks better of it.

He is punished and rewarded promptly.

"In an hour or so, give or take a few minutes, yes," says Jack without flourish. "I want you and the baby to be ready to go."

Will feels the bottom of his stomach drop. Ready to go? In an hour? Truly, Jack is without children.

Already paying dividends, this talking to people thing, Will thinks in a roaring wave of dread, his face flushing of color. He pinches the phone between his ear and neck, pounding into the living room again.

“You’re kidding,” he says loudly, searching Hannibal’s face for signs of consciousness. “You know he wouldn’t come here - not if he couldn’t do it safely.”

Hannibal’s right eye opens, the left still pressed against the pillow. It is clear, and unmoving from a fixed point across the room.

“So you *do* read your text messages,” Jack peevishly replies as Will fumbles to find the speaker button. “And I don’t know that. I’m not convinced you do either, after he got arrested the first time. He likes flirting with disaster, if our time together has taught me anything. That woman from Florence is probably halfway to the North Pole at this point, but I’ve learned to trust my intuition.”

If Jack means Will is disaster in this idiom is uncertain, only that it doesn’t sound inaccurate.

“Fleeing by truck to the closest international border sounds imminently practical,” Will snorts. “Not to suburban Wolf Trap where every busybody with eyes thinks they’re going to be the next headline for heroically catching him.”

Jack grumbles something to himself in frustration.

“It’s too simple, Will,” he says. “Especially between you and the absurd amount of money I’m sure he’s left you.”

“Left the bird-posted love child,” Will adds in his blandest tones. “You forgot that part, somehow.”

As before, Jack’s reply is a mystified hum, the universe fixated on smoothing the very rough edge of that detail until it rolls off people entirely. It’s fine with Will being a verifiable mental health disaster, and Hannibal being a literal cannibal, but not with people finding that strange.

“Got to deliver them somehow,” says Jack with a dismissive sigh. “Even a Faustian horror like Hannibal.”

Will nearly looks down to Beatrice in the crook of his arm to inform her that she shouldn’t take that personally, and that she is sure to grow into her own Faustian horror like Will grew into his ears, but it’s hardly important because Will seems to have a predilection to those - large ears and Faustian horrors - and the inconvenient truth that there are far worse things transpiring in the immediate future.

“How do you know *I’m* even at home?” Will asks and peers through a slit in the blinds - front drive still clear. Mud still untrodden from county road to house front. No mail in the mailbox. “I had arrangements even before Hannibal decided to take a trip to Canada. I’m hardly going to stop *now* .”

From his periphery, Hannibal sits up, shoulders squared off, face very pale and red-eyed in his exhaustion.

“Besides the fact that I haven’t heard from you? A wellness check - or something like one,” Jack says, as blase as a description of an unremarkable lunch, like Will and Beatrice are a disappointing breakfast burrito. “I had a local sheriff swing down the road to check that you were still there last night. Said he didn’t see anything of note, and I had other leads.”

“You *do* still have a lead,” Will sneers unseen, and tries to not let fear choke him.

Officers in his driveway, and him totally unaware between routine and the despair of packing. Hannibal unaware only in that he misses them by hours, still bound by the laws of physics

despite leaving progeny around for any old junky waterfowl to carry off and box with Will on the front step. If they came just a few hours earlier…

Will swallows.

"I'm half-packed," says Will, pulling the bottle back to make Beatrice slow down. She fusses, even when she gets it back, but maybe she'll not throw up even if Will's certain that *he* might. "Been half-packed for a few days now, with plans to get out of the spotlight. Had to board the dogs. Not as easy as throwing a duffel in the car to go to crime scenes…I'm not sure if an hour is long enough to get the baby where she needs to be and everything situated. I'd rather do what I had planned, if it's all the same."

"It's not. I'm not really asking," says Jack.

"And I'm not really consenting," says Will.

"Then it's a good thing I don't need you to. You do what you need to on your end - I get that your priorities are different these days. I assumed they would be…so, I'll be out in an hour or so," Jack repeats over the sound of Will's voice with steel in each word. "Give or take a few minutes," he adds as a threat, and hangs up.

Will shifts his head to grab the phone.

Hannibal takes it from him, and manages to do so without Will's protest.

"So we have an hour at best," says Hannibal with a gravel-rough voice, alert but still looking half-asleep between the pillow and here, considering the phone display shining up with the hour of the morning. "To decide whether to hold our ground, to divide and conquer, or retreat as one before Jack insists on your company."

"Give or take, if we're repeating things," Will says, heart in his throat again, looking down to Beatrice's tiny arms thrown up around her head, eyes closed and happily full.

“I don’t know if we even have *that* many options…and I don’t think it’s my company that he’s after,” he continues with a shaky breath.

—

The morning that Will wakes up to Beatrice, and the hope chest, and the headache left by his drinking and taking a large flying animal’s limb straight to the chest, Will thinks there’s nothing he needs less than a baby. That it’s preposterous that anyone would perpetrate this on him, or the child who has the misfortune to call him father - mother, if one wants to argue legal semantics, but *Will’s* all the same.

It’s a bad idea by all accounts. He’s a social failure. He’s a murderer. Hannibal’s one too - twentyfold Will’s own count, which drives home that he is not only a social failure and a murderer, but a poor judge of character as well.

He tries to negotiate his way out of it - “Don’t you dare,” he says to the bird. “I’ve been going through things.” He calls the state, like there’s been a grievous error in documentation. Like most things involving the state, they insist she is Will’s to deal with, so he had better start coming to terms with that alongside everything else on the list.

But her little hand waves from the blankets -

- and her little dark blue eyes crease at the rising of the sun -

-and Will can’t picture what life would be like if anyone ever attempted to take her from him. He barely managed to send the dogs off to the ranch, and that was with the intention of someday picking them up.

Not Hannibal, even when Will’s heart yearned for him to know her. Not Chiyoh, who Will knows wants nothing so much as purpose and a space carved in the shape of herself to belong to. Not Alana Bloom and Margot Verger. Not Jack Crawford, or Kade Purnell, or the Honorable Judge presiding over the comedic tragedy of Hannibal Lecter’s ways of showing

his love before he gains the wisdom to want this tiny person to be Will's as an apology and promise.

(*You don't think the stork revokes parental rights and takes back their cargo, but for the record, you wouldn't tolerate it from that great, feathered brute that bestowed her with all the elegance of a door-to-door sales pitch either, pretty furniture or not.*)

Once the dust settles, it's never felt like a risk that anyone *could* - that like most things Hannibal decides to give out, no one really gets to weigh in on the wisdom of that. Especially *now* , when everything is in its last hours to work out as perfectly as her little hands, and the infallible truth of paperwork that redacts some things, and the image of Hannibal holding her for the first time. It felt like the worst thing that could happen already did - the trial, the article, and the insistence that he somehow asked for any of those things.

It's never occurred to Will that the same system that puts him in protective custody when he is sick, and under arrest when he appears to simply be bad, has the same authority to do so with his unexpected but wonderful gift.

The fear in Will's stomach becomes an ache.

"You think he means to put you in witness protection," says Hannibal, who accepts Beatrice with arms that carefully pull her to his chest, minding the curve of her head.

"Through Beatrice, probably," Will nods. "Hard to get grown adults to cooperate when there's nothing to hold over their heads legally, but I think a serial killer breaking free of his motorcade probably qualifies as reasonable cause to remove kids from a home."

"And here I've always been told throughout my career that child protective services prioritizes keeping families together," says Hannibal like he's ever qualified for *any* standard operating procedure, scabbed hands still carefully fussing with the fine hairs on the back of her head.

Will almost asks for her back, if only to distract himself, but that wouldn't be fair - he may have had to take all the night shifts thus far, but he's also not walked fifty miles along river

banks with broken hand and ankle cuffs because every agency is looking for him and Chiyoh can only drive so many cars at one time. Hannibal earned a moment to admire his apology's craftsmanship.

Odds are looking good he doesn't have much time to do so.

"It doesn't sound like he trusts me, so he'll either subtract me from the equation, or use me as bait," says Will, fingers crawling up into the damp waves of his hair, and then back down to scratch at the regrowing stubble. "Which sounds more like something Alana would do than Jack, but he's tried something similar at least once before with moderate success."

"And duly rewarded with the image of your frontal bone being sawn open," Hannibal smiles sharply, closing his eyes to Will's scowl that follows that memory, and taking a gentle breath in the soft space between the baby's shoulder and neck. "As suspicious of you as he is, I suspect he is still certain that I mean you harm. Maybe another round of unpleasant herb tinctures between casual dismemberment, as one does with their loved ones."

(*You wince - you don't want to think about it. Jack sitting across the table from you, ashen faced and screaming. About your forehead, or Abigail, or the cruelties that Hannibal is capable of doling out,* ***especially*** *to his loved ones. About Bedelia leaving through the proverbial exit to the right of the stage, like she foresaw this whole disaster. About Mason Verger and Cordell Doemling being brought on you by no merit other than your face is a comely one, and that it would have offended Hannibal for it to be worn around by anyone other than you.*)

Will opens the hope chest, shuffling blankets and clothes around - it never is full, no matter how much he crams in it, but he still finds himself wondering what he can take out, and what he actually needs. It's good to do something with his hands, teeth still grinding against each other.

(*It bangs on - those things you don't want to think about. Reasons to not trust him. Your illness at Hannibal's hands. The months wasted in prison. But you have to think about them, don't you? Remember that's where you started - that this is now the wish for things to be better that you're living in, even if everything surrounding it is messy, and cruel, and that Hannibal isn't a part of that this time. Understand that is the man that you let love you tenderly, to fix what he broke.*)

“*Was* it casual?” asks Will, pushing aside glass bottles that clink together, much too loud in the empty spaces of the house. He puts a sweater of his own into the chest - he takes it back out. He considers crawling into it with Bea, and hiding from how complicated the reality of Hannibal actually is, but knowing Hannibal would probably just crawl in behind them.

It’s quiet for that moment, save the clinking of the bottles.

“No,” Hannibal roughly replies, rubbing the soft fabric of a onesie with a hand that seems impossibly large and bruised against the back of it. “No, I suppose it wasn’t. For you, only the most sincere and serious of dismemberments.”

Will scratches the side of his neck until it burns, and tries to not think about that.

There are more pressing matters at hand.

If they separate, Hannibal might be caught. Or he might not - but Will and Beatrice will be in no position to safely follow for a long time either way. Maybe years. Novosibirsk and the Yukon sounded great with no legal entanglements and no Jack Crawford to insist on a family vacation, but now they sound a million miles away without the benefit of him being in them.

If the three of them stand their ground, Jack might not be alone. Will’s a better shot when not under pressure to stop men from gutting their children, but he’s also never faced a firing squad, and the man he’s chosen to play house with is the kind to be killed on sight. There’s not many places to hide from a capable arrest team. There’s hardly even any furniture at this point - just the bed, a few sad small closets and empty shelves under the windows, the boxes.

And of course the infernal fine millwork of the toe-destroying hope chest, like some family heirloom that Will is cursed to take with him from now on.

If they leave, they might not make it more than a few minutes down the road. Will at home is a Will that the marshals and the sheriffs office can keep an eye on. If his house is the next

best bet for where Hannibal Lecter will appear, then his car is the next best bet after that. Nobody thinks Will is going to turn him in, and realistically, Will was never going to. Not even if Hannibal brought a body to the front door like a particularly pleased cat with a bird coming home from a three week absence.

He scrubs at his face some more.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispers into the wood of the lid, closing it. Opening it again and seeing all the contents as it was - generous, plenty to leave with, somehow still room for more and Will not entirely sure what he possibly could need to put there.

“...Leave with me now,” Hannibal says very quietly, walking to Will’s side. “As we could have before. The house is empty, the dogs are taken care of…what is left here that we need that we can’t fit in the car?”

“Other than this albatross of a chest?” says Will, scrubbing at his face. “And then what? Go on the lam as the most recognizable same-sex couple in the world, complete with dainty baby heiress? The inheritance money cures a lot of ills, but it doesn’t do us much good if the state takes either of us away, or a true crime enthusiast spots you like Waldo in an airport terminal.”

Hannibal comes closer, and the image of Will’s own socks comes into view when he stares at the floor instead of at Hannibal, afraid to meet his eyes and have him see the doubt in Will’s own. Inelegant things - grey and white, meant for cold mornings, not summer rainy days, or aristocratic doctors and diners with a taste for cashmere dress stockings and gentlemen’s garters to hold them in the fanciest of ways.

Hannibal wears them anyway.

And it makes Will so *happy* to see them there, just as it makes him happy to see the small kick of Beatrice’s foot on the bed, or now just above Hannibal’s waist, an escapee from under Hannibal’s arm and oddly at home against the black plain of the fabric there. To split up at this point feels wrong.

Cowardly.

(*Responsible.*)

“This isn’t a romp around the Parisian countryside,” hisses Will through his fingers. “There’s not going to be champagne and first class. We can’t just commit murder sprees between diaper changes.”

“Not if you’re starting out with that mindset, no.”

Will finds himself angry with that flippancy, eyes closed to the image of socked feet. “You don’t understand,” he says quietly. You haven’t been here to see how things changed…that caution has its uses.”

Hannibal watches Will with a steady gaze - saying nothing, save with the tiredness under his eyes and the firm set of his mouth. Hannibal could be disappointed in this nervous man Will thought he wasn’t anymore. He could just be thinking - at a rare loss for words. It feels like their last lamb supper, only Will is more afraid.

“Nothing is ever impossible to you,” Will says around a tight throat.

And there is much more to lose.

Hannibal doesn’t have two free hands and a knife this time - not that Will knows of, anyway. He can’t reach to embrace Will, pull at the little fine curls at the side of his neck as he did that terrible night in the kitchen. He’s too tired to carry Will several miles in the snow as he did from Muskrat Farms. He can only shuffle Beatrice from one tired arm to the other, hushing her fussing when switched from one broad shoulder to another, pressing her round head to the space between chin and neck, small fists waving and relaxing against the shirt there.

Only one free hand - the greatest criminal Will has ever known, hamstrung by a baby and his inconvenient affection.

But the one hand is enough.

Hannibal lifts it to Will's face, still stubbornly pointed to the ground, rubbing a thumb over the sparse regrowing hair and smooth skin of Will's cheek. He runs knuckles down the side of his neck, the scabs catching the sensitive skin there. Will imagines them bleeding. He imagines being bled on, a tattoo of his own to keep.

"I did not hope to be here two days ago," says Hannibal. "Well, perhaps that's not quite right… hoped, yes, but not anticipated. My penance was meant to be served in prison, not outside of it. Hard to imagine outside when the doors close for that first time, but you know that already, don't you, Will?"

"*Well then* , thanks for that preemptive perspective," Will says with a swallow, throat tight, anger coming back down to simmer. It's hard to stay angry white watching Hannibal shift Beatrice's weight from hip to hip, even when he wants to be. "I guess I probably should let you sleep for more than thirty minutes before getting into the practicalities of fleeing federal law enforcement with infants, seeing as it's…definitely your fault for not being able to learn about that yet, but useless to point out."

"I appreciate the gracious overlooking of my absentee fathering of children in the name of my long career in chaos and disorder," Hannibal teases quietly, adjusting the small socked foot on his torso.

Will snorts, wiping at his face and folding his arms, feeling safe to do so with Hannibal back in his own space. He resents the closeness. He craves it. He's generally having a hard time knowing how he should feel, only that everything is going to change again.

"Amongst a great number of other things," Will adds, praying he doesn't sound like his thoughts.

Hannibal is not long distracted with tiny feet - not now anyway, long fingers pulling the sock upright before falling away to find Will's wrist, and failing to unearth that from the tight cross of Will's arms, back to Will's neck.

“I think impossible and impractical is destined to be our family motto,” he says, warm and urgent, the same fingers rubbing again at the anxious beating beneath the skin and the dampness of still drying hair. Not so unlike the kitchen after all, save that Hannibal *smiles* . Not the small, amused one that is less of a smile than it is a habit. Not the wicked cut of a grin that shows his teeth. Just a man’s. Maybe a new one for them both.

The hair at Will’s neck snags. Hannibal carefully pulls the snag apart, smoothing it down.

“How else would we find ourselves where we are now?” he asks. “I won’t name who is who, of course,” he adds with a shrug. “Only that I hope that it isn’t any more hereditary than it already is, and written in all that we possess.”

Will wants to tell him he’s an idiot. Or at the very least which of those two things he is in their new family motto, to keep the record straight. The answer being both, but that being neither here nor there to the sound of cars on the roadway, gravel popping as they go.

Will’s eyes widen.

Cars on the roadway.

“Never a dull moment here in Wolf Trap, is there?” asks Hannibal, smile going wistful and resigned. He takes his hand back from Will’s neck. He smoothes a thumb over Beatrice’s ear.

—

When Alana calls Will to warn him the FBI is coming for him the first time, Will allows himself a scant number of minutes to think.

Where does he want to be in a year, assuming prison isn’t the first word that comes to mind? Will he still have a place in law enforcement, or will he trade it for a seat at Hannibal’s table?

Should Will have lawful authority over any person after pulling the skin of Randall Tier over an animal skull? Should Hannibal even *have* a table after watching Will do this with bright, shining eyes?

(***Yes****, you think, might be the answer to any of those things.*)

The same paralysis descends now - blue and red, strobing against the panes of the windows even in broad daylight. Tires hissing their way across wet asphalt and the puddle-filled entrance to the driveway. The mailbox looks like a white flag against all of it - not so long ago home to the unfamiliar brightness of a lavender card, enshrouded in manila yellow, inviting all of these things back. Still empty, judging by the lowered flag - the postal service is running behind for the day, Will thinks in irreverent annoyance.

“Oh fuck,” says Will in a mournful groan when the first part of all that comes to the forefront of the driveway.

“Right now?” says Hannibal, rubbing a hand on Beatrice’s back who has fallen asleep, as milk drunk as she could be thanks to Will’s foresight. “Your timing is questionable, but who am I to-”

Will waves his arms harshly, making for the window and the small gap between one of the blinds. Two cars - three cars - no, four, one sitting in the middle of the road, blocking access to the neighbors. No one jumps out of their vehicle with weapons at the ready, but the Volvo greets them all, sitting at the ready in the middle of the muddy gravel, a loud ***We’re Home!*** for anyone that knows him, car seat base merrily attached to the back seat in readiness for the airport if Will can ever actually escape all this madness.

A sheriff steps out from one of the patrol cars, and a deputy from the passenger side - very proud of their hats. Not the marshals then, thinks Will with weak relief. An escort. They must not know Hannibal is here.

From another car, the solid frame of Jack Crawford steps out onto damp grass, crossing the gravel to speak with them.

Will chews his lip hard enough to bleed.

“So much for an hour or two,” he says, but isn’t that just like Jack, changing the given timeline, taking his dinner invitation early to avoid being stopped.

Hannibal nods, swaying slightly with the baby in hand.

“I suspected it was a lie,” he says, drawing up close to gently pass the small sleeping baby between them. “Uncle Jack isn’t so clever with his deceit. His obsession with truth makes it hard for him to not leave a page dog-eared for the next person to pick up where he was last.”

Will watches this dumbly at first - arms normally so used to having her not reacting - before reaching to curl around the softness there, cotton wrinkling, tiny face scrunching. She feels heavier this time.

“He’s a menace is what he is,” Will hisses, heart in his throat again. Can’t be healthy, having organs take up residence behind your tonsils like Will’s are. Or at the very least, Not Straight.

“Can you get to the back door? Wait, no,” he says, seeing one officer circle the side. “Fuck… fuck. Where are we supposed to even put you?

“In your prayers, and somewhere safe,” Hannibal says in a rushed whisper, taking long strides to the kitchen. “Whatever we can make of either of those things.”

Will pictures him trying to shelter in the undersink cabinet, and that failing, an ironing closet turned oatmeal pantry that smells of the previous owner’s mothballs still. Maybe one shoulder will make it in, the one dampened by spittle-covered fingers. They’ll dazzle them with the image of a grown male convict trying to origami his way into spaces intended for smaller things to hide, and that failing, with how spectacularly stupid it is to have tried that to begin with.

Hannibal, imminently as fast with his hands as he is with the near silent tread to the kitchen, airs on the side of fight over flight after all, and tears open one of the many cardboard boxes in search of a knife. ***Miscellaneous***, says the box obnoxiously instead of the abbreviation, as a normal person would, and because Hannibal knows Will to a greater level than anyone has managed before -

-or at the very least has gone through every drawer and dresser in the house like a man looking for the degenerate stuff, as is also normal and totally appropriate -

- Hannibal knows this is where a walnut-handled field fillet knife will be, sheathed in a travel case and largely unthought of this past year. Where all the other knives are, Will couldn't say - he only marks the rest ***KITCHEN***, all caps, so that no matter where they moved, he'd never know what he was getting into because grief says dishtowels belong with half-empty boxes of protein bars, and nothing says totally stable, high-functioning male parent more than cans of formula layered into the pots and pans where he will definitely forget where they are.

"You can't possibly mean to kill them all with a folding knife," Will whispers between his teeth. "Consider that I have a rifle before going after my trout knife."

"Consider that a gun fight in close quarters with a child is just as inadvisable. At least this way I'll have the satisfaction of surprising at least one," says Hannibal, walking back into the living room on carefully quiet feet, testing the blade with his thumb. "Should it come to that."

There are steps on the front porch, accompanied by the grumbling baritone of the men standing before it - it strikes Will that the dogs would have barked by now if they were here, and that he misses them. That he will miss the front porch too, no matter what happens next, and how the light comes through the windows.

Fists knock on the door frame, unconcerned with Will's threats of violence scrawled in sharpie on paper outside, or misshapen skull graffiti.

(*You'll miss all of that too, in some degenerately masochistic fashion - baby's first home, polaroids say in the picture books, right next to the news article's of baby daddy's first federal and state trial.*)

“Upstairs,” says Will, throat tight. “In the hall closet, if there’s time. Hell, even the attic crawl. Just go *somewhere* .”

(*You’d miss Hannibal the most of all that - the obnoxiousness and indignities of trials that he’s brought to you aside. And that is why you must give this room and all the connected ones up.*)

Another knock - “Mr. Graham?” asks someone that Will doesn’t recognize. Maybe the sheriff, covering for Jack long enough for Jack to do something foolish. It’s suspicious that he’s not the first one at the entry, telling Will it’s time to go, like everyone’s late for school and this isn’t a lite version of being arrested.

“I’ll not leave a second time,” Hannibal says quietly, staring down into the folding blade of the knife. “I don’t pretend to think it will be easier to stay, but I feel a grim certainty that going is a mistake. I can only break out of so many prisons in a week.”

“So, you’ll…what, hold her while I sort this little solicitation problem out?”

“With your permission, certainly. She seems well into her cups and content to sleep it off now, if you don’t mind the expression.”

Will doesn't, but mostly because she has no concept of binge drinking.

The back door creaks from the mud room, door handle idly turning. When nothing gives, this too knocks. Another way out closed, with only the windows left to them, and Hannibal’s idea of a last stand with the junk drawer’s only valuable contents.

Will really *does* consider the rifle this time - how many shots he can shoot and reload before they can’t hold whatever invisible line has kept everyone except Chiyoh and Hannibal and the people Will permits to see his life now from crossing over. He thought he was over being afraid to lose things. He didn’t think there was much left of that to have taken from him.

Now people are saying his name through the windows, trying at the locks, their shadows looking for peekholes into the barren mess of stacked boxes and floor boards still dusty with dog hair and sun bleached at the edges of the missing furniture. Everything is rendered down to the things that he needs, held just out of their view, and with a good crowbar, they'll see that too.

He adjusts Beatrice in his arms for lack of better ideas what to do. She's as content as ever to ignore the chaos around her, cheek pressed hard into the crease of Will's shirt. Each rap on the woodwork outside feels like it's to his head, and through him to hers. He looks guiltily to each side of the house, unsure where to let the disaster start to unfold.

"Trust me," says Hannibal. "As unearned as it is, and that you have a thousand years of grievances and reasons not to. There is no danger or violence I would ever wish on her, and least of all on you."

Will sighs through his nose.

He lets the weight of that air go out of him until his lungs burns, waiting for the inhale. Beatrice sleeps on.

(*You'll have to, won't you, Will? Trust him. None of this works if you don't someday.*)

The absurdity of the situation is inescapable, but so is the risk. And it's true - it will all fall apart without each other. Perhaps if Hannibal can summon genetically matched children through bird-based fertility services, he can surely handle twenty minutes of quiet until Will can think of something more clever than unpacked bags to keep them all here and unharmed. He'll divert Jack. He'll find a fillet knife of his own.

"Ok...ok," Will says, feeling wildly foolish.

He passes Beatrice between them for a third time like it isn't. His arms ache a little when he does. Fear is a kind of pain, he thinks. So is loss. Can't avoid both forever.

“Somewhere less obvious than behind the kitchen door, please,” he pleads, ignoring that there’s not less obvious things to be than Hannibal Lecter, bigger than the small life that’s here. "Somewhere quiet."

“Mr. Graham?” the voice repeats. “Mr. Graham? Will Graham?”

“Time to leave, Will,” says Jack at last, muffled and insistent through the narrow strip of the mudroom and hall between. “Too much on the line for a leisurely morning, and a long way to go.”

Will ignores this as best he can, rubbing again from the bridge of his nose to the tip of his chin, torn between the doors. He feels bereft, watching Hannibal adjust for Beatrice’s weight and tuck her sniffling face back into the warm threads of his sweater.

“Will?” Hannibal says in an urgent whisper.

Again, louder, there’s a slam on the window of the front door. It rattles the glass, shakes the screen like it might just come clean off its hinges.

“*Will*,” says Hannibal again, unnaturally loud amidst the pressing danger to him just outside the panes of shuttered sunlight, a hand curled around the shell of a tiny ear to cover it. He says this so earnestly that Will stops his anxious turning to and from the door.

Hannibal nods, turning to the hope chest in the middle of the room.

“I told you once that a place had been made for us - it is still there. There is one *here* . As long as we have them, everything will be fine,” he says, the hand not holding his sleeping burden lifting the wooden lid with the knife pinched between them.

Will feels himself incredulously open his mouth, suddenly understanding.

No, surely not.

Surely trusting Hannibal to be a man of logic and reasoning isn't backfiring spectacularly this soon.

The chest has always been a black hole for things, but it still has walls and a wooden base. It has room for sweaters, and bottles, and inside jokes printed on tiny swaddles and blankets, probably the baby if she is still - ignoring all screaming protests inside that say this is also probably a suffocation hazard, and even under adult supervision is inadvisable. But absolutely not all those things, and her, and a grown middle aged man who opens his waistcoat button for meals and particularly low chairs, and probably has bought a premium seat in every airplane he's been on not for the luxury, but for the benefit of the extra space to stretch.

"You don't mean to -"

But yes, Hannibal does. There's no time for somewhere else.

Hannibal steps in legs first, turning to look one more time at Will, hand poised on the edge, Beatrice in the other. He is shiny eyed and grey-haired in the lowlight that makes its way through the rainy morning, and shares none of the wild fear Will knows has been etched into his own. They are a fine pair - stately black knight with tiny white queen, all wrapped up in her lace swaddle.

"Impossible and impractical, remember?" says Hannibal, lowering himself and her down where Will can't see them anymore, and closes the lid. The shuffling of glass and fabric beneath him goes utterly silent, the wood groaning closed and so very snug.

The carved corners of the chest weave around the edges that has murdered many a toe with their open faced flowers, unburdened by their cargo.

The silver grip of the handle smiles.

Will doesn't know if a more conspicuous place to hide could have been made by god himself, hurtled on short notice as a meteorite of folk handicraft, linen goods, and podiatric destruction to crater in the middle of the living room floor, but Hannibal would surely not have it any other way.

—

Will wonders if all primary caretakers feel this aghast watching their partners take the parenting reigns for the first time.

There's the initial desire to just stare at the closed chest for at least three seconds, just to marvel at how stupid a solution it is. If he stares long enough at it, maybe Hannibal will crawl back out and apologize. Maybe the damn thing will explode into flames under the beaming lens of Will's shock and awe.

The chest, proven to be unburdened by Will's discomfort and inconvenience in all its forms, sits as stalwart and quiet as ever. It is, as it always is, a sturdy if excessively overdressed thing. Clearly constructed with Hannibal in mind, if storks are in the business of aesthetic nursery furniture as well as infants and government record keeping.

And then there's the squad of police at his door.

Both doors continue to knock, either side gaining volume and irritation, like Will is refusing to accept getting served a court summons instead of what will likely amount to legal kidnapping. Will finds himself marveling at his talent for finding himself on the wrong side of the law in the scant moments left after marvelling at Hannibal being an idiot after all, often without provocation. It's very likely that if this goes poorly, he's going to find himself on it again.

It's not as though Will can throw the doors open and loudly proclaim "sorry, I didn't hear you - was too busy contemplating the ancestral heirloom as the cursed object that it must be", though it would feel good to try. While the other two thirds of the family play hide and seek, Will must be the elusive and rare Adult in the room, the only man left on earth with a healthy respect for physics and biology.

He lets Jack in first, twisting the back door's deadbolt with a swear.

Jack, for his part, manages to only look at Will like this has simply been another example of Will being taciturn and unsociable before the irritation falls from his face to look around the near empty house with suspicion.

"Where's the baby?" says Jack, looking around like he can't quite understand how Will's managed to disassemble his life in record time, which says more about Jack's lack of vision where Will is concerned than it does about Will's exceptional skill at decimating his environment these days. Will has been speed running that for a couple years now at least.

"Baby sitter," Will blurts out, as he often has when asked and Chiyoh was here to play the part. Perhaps it is him that is the idiot, standing here still holding the door open as is the theme of the morning, but he hopes it's excuse enough for Jack to buy some time. "Someone I trust to do right by her while I figure out the rest," he adds, turning to watch Jack's exploration of the living room.

On further consideration, that sentence is true, no matter Will's frustration. Even now, when Will disagrees with Hannibal's idea of what constitutes appropriate gift-giving and good hiding spots. Hannibal will deserve it if Beatrice leaves *him* with her particular brand of post-meal gift while they're trapped together in there, but Will is confident that he will do right by her all the same.

Will crosses his arm and adopts a stance of surly inconvenience - a signature move.

"I *did* say that she was hard to get where I needed her to be within an hour, but you have a long history of not listening to me. Did you not think I have any help at all after the last couple weeks?"

Jack glances to Will as Will says this, shrewd and pacing from corner to corner, hand unsubtly at his hip. "I have questions about that too," he says, unbolting the front door and easing it open. "We'll have time enough for that, I think."

“I thought you said there *wasn’t* time,” Will replies with a frown, fighting the urge to pull at his face again. Jack strides to and fro across the floor, slats creaking underneath his heels. Each pass near the chest is a bullet dodged. “Busy schedule and all that.”

“We’ll have to wait for the babysitter, won’t we? Might as well start packing up with all the trunks we have available here,” Jack reasons with a raised chin, and offers apologies to the officers as they wipe their boots at the front door - more courtesy than Will has ever received. “Seeing as they’ll be back…assuming that they’re not here?”

Will shakes his head in what he hopes is an entirely unsuspicious way, and hopes the trunk comment isn't an unsubtle dig at where the babysitter must obviously be. He suspects he just looks robotic, a windshield wiper that can’t quite glide over the details, leaving a glaring half circle of grime, if grime is actually antique woodwork.

The officers disperse - every cabinet opened and left ajar in their wake, every closet door showing the picked over bones of the house. They don’t bother talking to Will, and Will doesn’t bother talking to them, standing stock still and close fisted.

“No warrants?” Will carefully asks. “Or is this what we’re calling wellness checks these days?”

“I think we both know Hannibal falls within the definition of reasonable cause,” Jack replies. “This is just checking to make sure you didn’t leave anything behind.”

“How thoughtful of you,” says Will, teeth gritted together as Jack makes another pass around the room, barely missing the lid of the chest. “I’d hate for you to instead think I had misplaced my baking sheets in the warming drawer.”

Or his child, Will thinks, watching one deputy open the door of the oven. While he has called her a turkey on at least two occasions, and has fornicated with a known cannibal on one, Will is nonetheless insulted that Jack would even think to leave her somewhere that criminally dumb.

(*Unlike in the middle of the room, crammed between sweaters, onesies, and the bulk of Hannibal's body in a largish wooden box. Brilliant!*)

They stare at each other. Will tries to not think about the first time that he's arrested, passively subjected to indignity after indignity, and Jack willing to let it happen. He guesses that relationship never changes unless Jack's compass to true north does. It makes it easier to let the disappointment drop away. He might miss the house, maybe even parts of his job, but he thinks he won't miss this.

As they run out of small places to check, from barn in the yard, to water heater closet, to linen cupboards, Will watches in amazement as they pass over the only vaguely man-sized object in the room, and seemingly with blissful oblivion. There are no cramped toes, but many near misses. There are no bruised knees, but plenty of times that Will would have bet actual money on the odds. The few remaining boxes are carried out into cars. The bed is stripped, the trash taken out, like being witness to an intimidating but equally criminally dumb moving company's work.

Still, no one asks about the chest, and not a peep comes from it. No cries to wake in the dark, no adjusting long legs that would accidentally scrape the cedar lining with a socked and shackled foot. Hannibal is either every bit as disgustingly competent as a father as Will suspected, or he's accidentally rolled onto her and there's no good way to check.

And still, because Will isn't an idiot even if he's deadly curious if this is the case and wants to tear the lid open and make sure Hannibal is doing whatever it is he's doing right, no babysitters or babies appear.

This frustrates Jack.

"You seem pretty unconcerned," he says, holding Will's gaze. "All packed up and ready to go, and you still don't have your baby after all those weeks of playing castle defense out here."

"The sleepless first months of parenthood and the existential threat of the press will do that to you," says Will, nodding his head down to the ground. "And besides, it's pretty obvious that we're not ready," he adds before biting his lip hard enough to feel it go bright and stinging with pain.

Real smart, pointing out the obvious when everyone seems very content to miss it.

(*Your life, relationships, and career in a nutshell, you suppose.*)

Jack frowns in response, gesturing this way and that, head turning with his hands. “Looks like an empty house to me, Will, unless you want to be petty about the junk drawers, or mean to take the bed and the kitchen sink while we’re at it - anything I’m missing that you’re wanting to share?”

Will is inches away from gesturing in like kind to the carven wood chest between them, and asking if his nickname The Guru actually comes from a profound disregard for the material world instead of keen observational skills. He doesn't, but the temptation sits there anyway, with its stubby wooden block legs at the ready to mess up Jack's knees and feet.

Jack steps towards him, and in remarkable fashion, sidesteps the entirety of the thing like he doesn’t realize it was there to begin with, eyes glazed in a familiar way.

No knees rendered pulverized - no feet crushed in the magnificence of its impracticality and enviable solidness.

(*That look. **That fucking look.** Sweet. Vaguely mystified. Completely absurd, no thoughts, head empty acceptance of your unadulterated explanation of where your baby comes from. “Not the first time it’s happened!” says the cheery cop looking as daft as a doorknob. “That’s great Will,” says Jack.*)

*He can’t see it*, thinks Will in mute shock, fists clenched as hard as he can.

Another officer asks Jack a question in passing, arms full of haphazardly closed kitchen boxes - he too sidesteps the chest in like fashion.

Relief comes at Will like a wave.

*None of them can*, his heart whispers in reply, calming at last.

Will licks his lips, and tries not to get ahead of himself.

Who else could have missed it that shouldn't have? There's so few people that are permitted into his home, there's not been many opportunities to observe the theory, much less to have already formed it. He supposes Chiyoh would never leave something behind without putting it away. Bedelia, always with the greatest vantage point, would never stare at something she would be risking her life to see through the corner of a giant cedar chest. Margot sidestepped it just as Jack did, and not a snide comment to be heard about how out of place it is.

But Will feels it in his gut, from the same place as the missing phone number to Garret Jacob Hobbs' employment contract.

Will's mind races - there's no way for Hannibal to have known. He's sat on it, for god's sake. He's barely even been here more than a couple of hours, and mostly spent it halfway between exhaustion and the learning curve of caring for children under the age of six months, but all the same, Will could shake his hand and sing him praises for the otherwise moronic decision.

*None of them. Not a one can see it.*

After this, hiding the shaking excitement as best he can: *I need to get inside of it.*

"I'll be honest with you, Jack," he says, throat tight, trying to muster the right words to say. He needs Jack out of the room. He needs *everyone* out of it.

If he's wrong, this will be terrible. Astronomically so. It's at best a two foot by five foot piece of furniture, and Will is not exactly a small man. Hannibal may be capable of bending people into unfortunate origami and bonzai on a whim, but those people are generally dead, and Will

is going to have to navigate that there's always a chance they don't fit, and he'll just be exposing them.

If he's right, but does nothing…Jack's not going to keep him here. They can wait the next several hours, and the mystery babysitter isn't going to suddenly manifest like a kindly elf. If Jack suspects, and Will thinks it's likely he does, Will's maybe half an hour off from an arrest of his own, with or without Beatrice.

Jack looks at him, brows raised.

"Upstairs," says Will. "First room in the hallway…I offered somewhere for a mutual acquaintance of ours to stay. I never thought she'd do what she's…well," Will shrugs, and briefly sends a prayer out into the universe that this works, and that Chiyoh doesn't kill him later if anything comes from this, and proceeds to lie out his ass.

Jack gives him a thunderstruck look, and then disappointment floods his face.

Will presses on. "She might have left something behind, in the floor vent," he says. "The woman from Florence. I needed the help, she needed somewhere to stay. There's a few loose boards up there that can be lifted," he adds with a sigh, rubbing at his eyes. "There could be *something* for you to work with."

"*I can't-,* " Jack begins before his brows come down hard, his mouth a sneer. "I can't believe how you've changed. Your poor planning cost everyone a lot," he says. "A van full of officers and guards *died,* Will, just from her actions alone. Whoever else Hannibal finds between here and wherever they're going are at risk of the same. You know no one can find Jon Sekine?" he asks, looking at Will sharply again.

*Thanks Jack,* Will thinks. *I definitely planned to be the unwed single mother with no childcare in this situation. Maybe if you had offered some kind of benefits, but the Lecters are a bitch to compete with, aren't they?*

He is not sorry to hear about Sekine at all, but keeps his head down anyway. He'll have to ask Hannibal about that. Maybe Chiyoh, if he ever sees her again. He'd like to shake some hands,

maybe bestow some keys to the city. There's a small part of him that knows the man is...was, realistically. *Was* just another person in a sea of millions trying to make their mark on the world, but Will has killed people for similar goals, and less.

"Hindsight is twenty-twenty," says Will with a sneer in kind. "She helped me once - I was returning a favor. I'm sure everyone will make sure I'll spend the rest of my days suffering for it, just like they have for the baby you all think I should be punished for," he adds bitterly, like that means he is sorry and not that she will undoubtedly find a way to lord this over him alongside her good baby handling skills and immaculate cleanliness. "But I thought I was just doing what was right."

There's certainly plenty to unpack there, and Jack nearly looks up to the task. He stares for a minute at Will, and Will at him.

"You used to be the best, Will Graham," he says, mouth curling now into something sad. He doesn't say anything else though - just turns away, attention diverted, to take the stairs one thudding step at a time, all the king's horses and men outside or with him.

Will stands in the quiet for only a moment, staring at the latch of the chest. It is warm against his finger tips.

(*And you are, some small part of you rallies against that slight. You are the best, for what you are. You survive a hundred transgressions, small and large, and still are you at the end of the day, if a little ragged at the edges and smelling of formula and baby wipes these days. You're still standing against the tide of the Vergers, the government, the media, the people that trust and consume those things, changing diapers and fielding calls so carefully worded but written to be love letters. You are Will Graham, a kid that people say is a grown man that doesn't know how the fuck he grew up to be here, but you are, and Hannibal is, and together you are and make things bigger than the nuisance of public opinion and what someone else thinks is* ***good****.*)

He listens to the feet upstairs - how the house creaks under their weight. To the sound of car doors closing, the murmuring of voices outside, laughing, having a giggle at the remnant of his home stuffed into their trunks.

The lid lifts easily to his hand, carven figures biting into the skin of his palm. It creaks like the floor.

It murmurs in Hannibal's voice: "Time to go?"

Will takes a breath, easing a foot in without looking for the bottom. It will resolve itself as it always has - a jumble of things that always inexplicably fit.

"Time to stay," he says, and fusses his way to slide between slivering hair, lace blankets, the shifting limbs still warm with the heat of their own bodies to accommodate. He slides in easily, and feels Hannibal's hand take the one not at the lid to guide him in.

"I do love a good lay in," says Hannibal from somewhere between flannel and the softness of cotton print blankets. He sounds relaxed - nothing of the outside present to bother him. "Hard to come by here. Always late nights and early mornings where you are concerned."

But Will says nothing in reply, shifting his waist, belly, shoulders, head underneath the lid, creaking its way to slam shut when he pulls his hand away.

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There is only darkness for the first few minutes.

He shifts against the bony corner of what he thinks is Hannibal's hip, listening to the clinking of the glass bottles against each other. Hannibal, in turn, spares an arm to grab Will by his and settle them somewhere into the muted dark to press knees to each other, heads almost close enough to steal each other's air. Between them, Beatrice sleeps still, wrapped up and comfortable. Will thinks he hears her snuffle in her little nest of wash rags and stuffed animals, raise fists to scrub at small eyes and downy hairs, but she lowers them again, breath going even and deep.

So he hasn't accidentally crushed her. Neither has Hannibal. A+ parenting, if he says so himself. He wishes he still had Harley to watch her take little mewling gasps, and Winston to watch Will do the same, but Hannibal will do for now.

(*For as long as either of you can.*)

It's not *comfortable* in this space, per se. Like it always has been, there's just enough room for whatever is necessary, and that means Will is halfway between a plush tiger and a stack of cloth diapers that he knows are clean by merit of having washed them himself, but wishes were not the only thing keeping his bad shoulder from the amorphous press of hard cedar planks that have a place in here as much as the three of them and their scant belongings.

Hannibal brings a hand to his head somehow, even in the dark.

Outside, sounding miles away, things crack. People murmur like heartbeats. All of it waiting for them to come out and push them into different boxes from this one, like it makes a difference.

"Don't trouble yourself with it, Will," says Hannibal so softly, so barely there that Will mistakes it for the shifting of a folded sheet, or the creak of wood against wooden floor. He is pressing his nose into the whorl of Will's ear, tracing its shell with fingers as careful and tender as he did Beatrice's. "They'll go as all the rest do, and all that will be left is us."

Will opens his mouth to argue - *always* ready to argue.

But the quietude of a snowy night falls on them, big flakes dampening whatever is beyond the window panes. It is warm, and they are slotted against each other, necks at rest on each other's, child carefully resting between them.

He closes his mouth, lips pressed tight against each other. He is tired. Hannibal must surely be too, and Beatrice well ahead of them and accustomed to the restfulness of things that are growing and small.

There is no police in this place, or law, or responsibility to anything other than themselves.

So they too rest.

# parenting with an accent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Will and Hannibal's lives followed any sort of sensible course of action, they would open the lid of the chest after what felt like an acceptable amount of time, and find themselves surrounded by every active member of law enforcement in a thirty mile radius. Alongside these fine individuals, several newscasters, photographers, journalists and Chiyoh wearing a fake mustache and glasses would stand at the sidelines, likely clapping for them thinking that hiding in the only piece of memorable furniture left in the house would work.

"Great work there, genius," Jack would say. "I can't believe I used to pay you for your powers of observation."

"Can you guys crawl back *into* the chest?" Freddie Lounds would ask. "I just want to make sure I get a shot of the two of you crammed in there like the world's worst bento box. It's not literally coming out of the closet, but it's close enough for me."

"I can't believe I stopped reading my book, ate frozen chicken for a week, and killed an entire police escort for the two of you to ruin this, and in such a disappointing manner," Chiyoh would say, rightly plucking Beatrice from between Hannibal and Will. She would probably go on to disappear into the Kuril Islands to begin her character arc as reluctant guardian to a child who will hopefully hold no interest in mortal vice and death as an adult, and not grow up to eat people that are having a bad day and poorly communicating it.

(*At least you hope. You're supposed to wish better futures on your children, right? At least better than evading the justice system via antique furniture.*)

Alternatively, and to the convenience of most people other than Will and Hannibal and their circle of unfortunate acquaintances with bones to pick, the citizenry of the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area would collectively lift the damn chest and take it to the nearest high security prison, releasing them like a pair of food aggressive badgers into an enclosure.

No need for any smart remarks before sealing the door. No risk to life and limb for people who have the privilege of not knowing much about Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, and their aspirationally immaculate conception of baby and luggage.

But those things are grounded in reality.

And when was the last time they were anything like that?

To the likes of Will and Hannibal, whose days are now fantastic and lacking in anything shaped sensibly, not a single normal feeling, thought, or action between the two of them, there is only gentle morning sun, peeking from the gap between hinged top and wooden body of the chest - Hannibal's scabbed fingers pushing carefully at one corner, and Will's broad and pressed against the grain of the lid's center.

Summertime birds sing from outside the raised blinds of the windows, likely hopping between treetops and lawn.

The scratched wood of the floor is quiet underfoot, dust and light-bleached remnants of life here forgotten and content to sit in memory of before.

So there is one sensible action, they suppose, growing as trees do towards the warmth outside - to stretch the sleep out of their arms and necks, and to stand, their own fledgling of circumstance waking to the day with them.

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There's not a particular cue that pulls Hannibal and Will from their hiding place - not even Beatrice, content and still as she was on that first day that she comes to them by way of wings and insistent delivery animal. The persistence of a quiet night of snow stays with them, all the dull thuds of booted feet and harsh voices unwelcome through the carved sides of their hiding place. There are warm hands. There are soft sighs of sleep.

They open their eyes in the dark, take the long first breath of the day. They roll shoulders against each other, and knock knees, and remember that they are grown men tangled like vines in the same bed that reach for each other as much as the sun.

“We’ll have to open it eventually,” says Hannibal to Will’s hairline, breath humid against the skin. “Even Jack Crawford isn’t a persistent enough hunter to stand in an empty house for several hours when there are other game trails to follow.”

“I was just starting to come to terms with staying here in perpetuity,” Will huffs quietly, fingers feeling for the roundness of Beatrice’s cheek. The space makes no sense anymore than her existence, but maybe her existence prepared him for that - months to come to terms with the fact that nothing governs his life save what suits him best if he gives it the chance to suit him.

(*Fatherhood suits you. Early mornings, messy counters, the baby soft nails of her hand scratching at the rough skin of yours.*)

“There’s a whole life to live from this moment onwards,” says Hannibal. “Do you really want to spend it in a literal box?”

(*Loving Hannibal suits you too. It feels good to admit to it, after so many people have tried to trick you into saying it doesn’t, and Hannibal has ardently set your world on fire which should have been reason enough not to.*)

(*Here you are anyway.*)

Will snorts, absent mindedly stroking at the hairs around the baby’s neck. She huffs a little too, head turning away. Ticklish as always - easy to please with loving hands. He envies her trusting nature, and hopes that she keeps it in the same breath.

“You really can’t keep the heavy-handed implications out of pillow talk, can you?” asks Will, flexing the muscles in his back and wishing the knots in them away. His shoulder is

screaming the indignation of healing gunshot wounds, every finger tingling with numbness.

He can't see it, but he suspects Hannibal smiles.

"Philosophical considerations and the validity of calling your old knitwear a pillow aside, I suspect Schroedinger would have preferred for the cat to live," says Hannibal, tapping what is presumably the plank above him. "We should open it."

Will is sorry no one can see him roll his eyes. "Are we the cat before or after the radioactive substance has been released?"

Hannibal lets out a laugh, unburdened by the possibility of disaster outside, arms straining a little to lift the seal above them.

"I suppose we're about to find out," he says with the peculiar cheerfulness of morning people.

But it turns out fine after all, doesn't it?

The house is empty. The cars have gone. The day passes with the officers and Jack from the driveway and becomes night, and in the strange non-existence of their nest made of the necessary remnants of their life in Wolf Trap, they wait for the dawn to see if the fantasy is over, if Cinderella's carriage is a pumpkin again.

So, no dead cats, which is really the preferable outcome by more than just Schroedinger and the Copenhagen interpretations standards.

When Will pulls at his eyelids, still half standing in the chest that feels decidedly normal with Hannibal standing next to him and fighting a pacifier into Beatrice's squawking mouth, Hannibal asks him if he's alright.

“My understanding of physical matter has been flipped like a cheap card table, time is inconsequential when not observed, and I have no mouth and I must scream,” Will mutters into the insides of his palms.

Beatrice spits out the pacifier. Hannibal puts it back in, grinning with all his teeth. A futile effort, but if lines of math scribbled into a journal and some heretofore unexplained agreement with the storks prove anything, perhaps not so futile if he stays at it long enough.

(*He convinced you to stay this time. To take a chance, and lie very still, when the urge to run or fight is screaming up in you. How’s that for a success story?*)

For eighteen hours stuffed into a small box devoid of any sense of time and space with a person and a half, Will feels surprisingly rested. A bit like he’s been dragged backwards through a hedge after a long nap, mind you, but rested.

*I’ll write my own baby book*, Will thinks with the kind of hysterical amusement one only feels after narrowly avoiding severe and permanent harm - somewhat like the first days of his sleep deprivation as the sole provider for a newborn infant, he supposes. *Sleep Training for Bird - Gifted Children, by Will Graham*. The book will be short, with a single page diagram of the baby and himself crawling into a crate and having a blanket thrown over top. That’s how it works for parrots, right? All the better if it works on Hannibal too.

The Volvo still sits in the driveway - how very cute of Jack to leave it out like an enticing toy to play with, or to observe like a cashew left for mice to see if they can be caught. Will knows better, looking at how obvious the key is on the kitchen counter, the last thing left to them.

That’s what they have, he supposes. A car that’s a trap more than a car. A chest full of household goods, but not much in the way of money other than what Will’s billfold fits - a generous wad of hundreds, but hardly *smuggle-me-over-the-border* money. A fillet knife that someone gave him for Christmas and has never been opened before yesterday. A cell phone that’s gone dead, and likely can never be turned on again.

Each other.

Beatrice has her face scrunched up when Will looks over to her - the face of annoyance more than the face of true upset. It's funny to think there was a time he couldn't tell them apart, and that Hannibal doesn't now.

"*Starai bene, starai bene*," Hannibal says sweetly, still working at his task and just as stubborn as her. "It's not food, but we'll have some soon enough." His eyes are curiously damp, but not with anything other than awe.

Not so bad then.

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*A place made for us all*, as it turns out, is fairly literal.

"Another house," says Will, frowning like this is much too simple, "in easy driving distance."

"On the Calvert Peninsula," Hannibal says, doing an admirable job of heating formula with a nearly bare handed grip on an open baby bottle over the stove. "I didn't see the purpose in making a hiding place so far away that getting to it was prohibitively difficult. Rather defeats the purpose, doesn't it?"

After several weeks annoyed with the particularities of cleaning and trying not to break them, and watching with restrained certainty that Hannibal will burn himself any minute and deserve it, Will finds that maybe the glass bottles are a very fine first gift after all. The formula won't be quite warm enough - much like Hannibal's last attempt unless he commits to some impressive blisters - but it's something while they figure out the next steps.

(*But you **are** impressed with his dedication to warming it, unwilling to make the same mistake twice. You know him to be a quick study - it's nice for it to be in something as innocuous as this, rather than sewing men into an eye of eternity, or tying flies so you can go to prison and throw your tantrum where it's less visible.*)

The part of Will not swooning over very basic paternal drive rolls in its aggravation at the simplicity of this plan.

“Your original master plan was to kill Jack Crawford and escape to your vacation home in the Bay?” he asks, leaning against the counter, rotating his ankle that still feels cramped from its long storage.

“Is that not the usual method of people with means to do so? My apologies for it not being in the Florida Keys,” Hannibal says, rotating the mouth of the bottle between careful fingers. “And besides, it’s not like I intended to stay beyond what time it would take to do the necessary. Passports, visas, currency reserves, that sort of thing. It’s not as if I magically knew to have one for an infant. Why not be comfortably suburban in the meantime while the arrangements are made?”

Fair. As the days have shown, something about being in plain sight has its merits.

“Being wealthy sounds like tedious planning,” Will sighs, and bounces Beatrice when she gives him her best squirming kick. “Better you than me,” he says to her, and delivers a loud kiss to the side of her head.

She smiles, because that’s the kind of mood that finds her easily when she’s distracted from late breakfasts and long nights, a happier person than Will in the same circumstances.

Hannibal smiles too, watching her spit-damp chin like it’s the finest thing among all the many fine things he’s had, turning the glass mouth of the bottle with two fingers wrapped in a burping cloth. Another gift of the standard stork parent first-time starter kit, unconcerned with what either of them could choose themselves for her, only that she would need one.

If Hannibal has any comments, he keeps them to himself - a rare contentment with nothing to cook with but an old stove and a cotton rag.

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When the matter of hungry children is settled, the matter of likely booby-trapped cars comes to the forefront. Neither of them is of a mind to walk from Virginia to coastal Maryland, but neither are they of a mind to take something Jack wants them to have.

“A few digital trackers on it, probably,” Will says, looking it over from outside its windows, but never touching it. He feels a bit violated imagining it - someone altering his car, his method of getting around in the world since he was a teenager, but it is what it is.

“It’s been too long since we hid to know for sure if they came back at any point to check or add more,” he says with a frown. “I’d say I can find all of them if there are any, but would likely be wrong.”

“Then another car,” says Hannibal, as though this is imminently reasonable. It’s rational, but maybe not reasonable. “Something that won’t be quickly missed, and preferably no complicated electronics.”

Which Will can do - if a little guiltily. Reasonable, after all, is for people with moral qualms that stick when thrown at the wall, and Will is finding he’s fairly impervious to shame as the days progress. The elderly neighbors have an old blue Chevrolet truck that will do the job admirably, with trunk space to spare for the hope chest - assuming it isn’t secretly a benign black hole. They don’t often use it, if at all. The rainbow tweed of the interior will offend Hannibal personally, as will the tape deck, but given how ridiculous everything else is today, Will’s hardly willing to stick his nose up at an easily hotwired stick-shift and quarter of a tank of gas.

There’s a brief debate about the safety of riding inside the hope chest, and if it’s a punishable state offense to leave a passenger and baby unbelted like an erstwhile rolled rug in a cargo hold. When deemed excessive, the debate shifts to the car seat, ominously perched in the Volvo before it’s decided it’s also not worth the risk - they can hardly disassemble it with the fillet knife to check for anything suspicious without leaving it useless, so they may as well risk driving without one.

An empty box full of blankets made an acceptable throne for the richest baby on this side of Difficult Run Road in the days when she first arrived - she’ll make it to the first department store to replace it a second time.

As is tradition and expected, the chest makes moving it as hard as it can.

“Yep,” groans Will, gritting his teeth, arms straining. “It’s not any better with two than it was with one.”

Opposite of him, arms straining but with more grace in his all-black ensemble like a supervillain, Hannibal tightens his mouth. “I’ve certainly never seen a stork carry more than a handful of fish,” he says with an equally tight voice. “Perhaps in addition to their irreverence for the law of conservation, they have an equal disdain for definable atomic mass.”

“Great haters of science and letting people sleep their hangovers off, those foreign shorebirds,” Will says with another groan, the chest sliding noisily over the bed of the truck. “Not dissimilar to you. What’s with you and all the physics jokes today, anyway? I mean,” he sighs, pulling at the bridge of his nose, “I’ll take it over all the ethical pondering and suggestions to commit grand theft auto and a little life-affirming murder, but you’re unusually fixed in your allegories today.”

Hannibal shrugs in his way - a fluid movement that deserves another name, like a dancer’s bow. His shoulder is tight with what he insists is an injury of convenience, but he bends to pick Beatrice up with her box like it’s no trouble at all, rubbing her brows with a thumb to either side.

“Call it a curiosity for how little it seems to matter in the last few weeks,” he says, smoothing the barely there hairs, handcuff manacles still clinking away at the wrists. “I may very well end up religious by the end of all this. Great leaps of faith abound with a few happy accidents that I will have to share with you later.”

True. There’s a lot between them to catch up on.

Their lives since Hannibal’s arrest, mostly. How parenting looks like when there are two people shouldering the responsibility and the weight. If and when it’s appropriate to teach children about memento mori, tabula rasa, and modus operandi - you know, all the positive latin concepts that have zero chance of being internalized by a kid born (*hatched?*) to two serial killers. Where the stork even came into play to begin with.

He did promise Will to explain that someday, if it's anything that truly *can* be.

But wiping his hands on jeans worn for two days, and likely for at least two more, something bothers Will more than any of those things on the list.

Hannibal's sudden leap of faith, as he calls it.

"How did you know they couldn't see the chest?" Will asks, fingers still smarting from the effort it takes to lift the damn thing. He's a little afraid to hear the answer.

Hannibal doesn't respond immediately, seemingly of similar hesitance to have it put to words. That's almost answer enough for Will, that he won't like it.

Hannibal looks at the chest instead, and lets his fingers trace the whorls of flowers there. Whatever he sees, it is not what he touches - some distant memory. Maybe something not meant to be shared in the walls of his memory. That bothers Will too - the occasional reminder that their synchronicity is imperfect, and Hannibal will always have some secrets that are not for sharing, that Will's empathy is limited to what a man who otherwise doesn't like to explain will give him.

(*You did say you'd have to trust him, didn't you?*)

Hannibal nods, flicking the hard corner of a carved flower.

"I didn't," he admits eventually, thumb smoothing and catching on a curling leaf of rich wood near to the petals. "Not with absolute certainty, as you're asking…only that it reminds me of something my mother used to have where she hid valuable things. It felt purposeful that I saw it. Or at least that I had seen something like it before, if it wasn't the same."

Will in turn admits to himself that  he has a strong urge to shake Hannibal at that admission - that once again a whim governs their lives for the foreseeable future, as calling Hobbs had been at the very start. There's so much that could have been lost.

He bites his lips, staring at the ground, and listens instead.

Hannibal allows all this doubt to flash before him with his usual ease, shouldering Beatrice from one side to the other, box rasping against the black sweater. Will supposes he's not accustomed to her yet, tiny kettlebell that must be carried everywhere that she is. One would think a lifetime of hauling corpses would prepare a person for a baby, but then again, maybe it's good that those things stay on different branches.

He nods again at Will, breathing slowly through his nose, free hand pulling the top of a socked foot back into place.

"A foolish assumption, but foolish enough perhaps to evade Jack's consideration. I have been told at length my tastes are what caught me the first time," he says with a small smile, sliding a finger along the fringed edge of the sock and the little sliver of skin between it and the onesie. "Another inheritance of my mother's. She was at least better at disguising hers, even if she didn't give them up."

"You have a funny way of evaluating risk," Will says, shaking his head, and rubbing his hands. "But I guess I should have seen that coming from a man that thought consulting for the FBI would fit neatly between the occasional live performance and human butchery."

"The hours are trying, it's true," says Hannibal, dry as a bone but still shiny eyed with his happiness. He is not at all embarrassed by his thought process, and enviably so. "But you must make time for the things you enjoy in life."

Will rolls his shoulders, looking to the house and back, a smile of his own trying to sneak out.

Hannibal sees it, even if it does break ground on the tired lines of Will's face. A talent of his, beyond all the other hobbies and extracurriculars - that he always knows the secret joys hidden in Will's face like it was written for him to see.

Hannibal turns his attention back to Beatrice, burbling away in her own company, squinting against the brightness of the morning.  She knows nothing of the peril that has passed, and the rest that waits. She merely waves her wet fists, Hannibal catching one to deliver an unreserved if silent kiss to the infant-round back of one.

They must make one hell of a family portrait, standing in the driveway where it all began, Hannibal's patch of remembered scorched earth covered by the oily body of a truck that has no business being here, that Will's very own hands stole from people he's been friendly with for years.

"It's an absurd wish that brought us to this moment…" he says, considering her fingers that uncurl long enough to wrap around one of his. "I just hoped it had a little more absurdity from the past left to share."

Will would do it again, he realizes, staring at Hannibal swaying with the box and the baby, speaking his soft confessions to her.

Steal trucks. Lie to people. Chew gristly cheeks off people who threatened them, be insular and hateful and shy of anyone that isn't a part of their family. He'd crawl into another chest to be with them, even if it was only for a few scant seconds before it would be over, everyone in cuffs, nothing left but the thought of blankets, and limbs, and every head bent to each other in love. It's probably what they deserved, even if it's not what they got.

Seven hundred years of sentencing, thousands of evidence photos, hundreds of articles, dozens of people killed between them, all the court's justice, and all of that made worthless by a wish.

That sits between them with the chest in the truck, and the sun growing warm over their heads.  Will's eyes grow shiny as Hannibal's. He nods, and hopes that his gratefulness shows there instead of where his mouth is quicker to criticize - months of habit learned in anger, difficult to dismantle even with all this happiness to go around.

He closes the tailgate, giving the top of it and the chest a little slap for luck - something his own father did before road trips, or moving to new places. It feels important to do it.

“How did *you* know?” asks Hannibal, leaning against the corner of the truck bed, bending his proud head to see Will’s face. He’s always had a fascination for Will’s tears, Will thinks, rare weather that they are.

“You must have had some kind of faith of your own in it,” Hannibal says tenderly when Will doesn’t quite meet his gaze. “Or isn’t that why you asked? Folie et deux doesn’t usually preclude all doubt, and you looked like there was nothing you wanted to do more than choke me in the moment the decision was made.”

“A recurring theme,” Will says with a small smile of his own, blinking away the blur of the truck’s bright paint and lights to lock eyes.

Hannibal’s search for something.

“Indeed,” he says. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

They stare at each other for a moment. It’s easy to forget they’re fond of each other sometimes - that it wasn’t always a flaming garbage pile. Sure, Hannibal threw gas on it, and Will added some oil soaked rags for longevity, but there was a nice place to be themselves underneath all of that. They will spend the rest of their days sweeping away the ash the mess left behind to find it again.

A bit of honesty here, then, in exchange for Hannibal’s.

“I didn’t,” says Will, thinking back at the number of times he’s caught his foot on the corner of it, or struggled in a tired stupor to pull fresh clothes, bottles, whatever tiny ephemera it deemed appropriate for him to have out of its depths. “No long-past memories here, just observation. It was always very real to me, but anytime I tried to explain *why* she was real they all just got the same look on their faces. I saw the same in Jack’s face, looking right at where the chest should be, and I just *felt* it.”

Nobody seems to be willing to acknowledge the bizarre method by which Beatrice has been delivered, so why would they acknowledge a six pound bird, carrying a two hundred pound

piece of furniture with a baby of like size to itself? Anyone other than Hannibal anyways, who will apparently crawl into said furniture on an optimistic guess.

“Does it matter?” asks Will, rolling his shoulders and neck. “At least any more than the stork does? It left everything that we needed, from babies to bibs to nostalgic folkcraft caches from dead mothers. *Aves ex machina,* or whatever dark moon rises on people like us.”

Will walks along the body of the truck, fingers following a chrome streak like a star.

“Besides…” he says, throwing the driver’s side door open and the safety of a wall - it creaks, frustrated to be used for the second time this summer, not unlike Will’s back after the morning’s work. “It wouldn’t have changed anything.”

Hannibal does the same, box and baby in one arm, broad hand at the handle. He looks at Will from across the cab, brows raised, waiting, Beatrice’s round face peering blindly towards the dusty windshield.

“It was where you were, wasn’t it?” asks Will, looking down to fiddle with the dashboard wires with chapped fingers, listening for the ignition.

He allows Hannibal to hold them when the driveway disappears in the rearview mirror - his fingers, not the wires, even if Hannibal could use a good shock - a barely there grasp, softly tickling the inside of his palm, tracing the rise of veins in his wrist. He concentrates on this, and puts away the thought wondering if he’ll ever see it or the house again.

Maybe that invisible point in the gravel will always be there, long after they’re gone - a monument to their habitat that they must leave for better conditions, maybe on the opposite side of the world. The windows are glazed and bright in the sunlight, all the blinds drawn upward with nothing behind them, but once it was Will’s, and Beatrice’s, and theirs with Hannibal in spirit for a time, no matter that it was brief and filled with danger.

—

Two hours is nothing in the grand scheme of master plans.

Shit, Will considers while flexing his fingers to the plastic of the steering wheel, Hannibal planned months of prolonged illness and hypnotism in hopes that Will might do a little therapeutic manslaughter, not to even start on sending himself to prison for an indefinite period to wait for Will to miss him. Two hours is practically a blink of an eye by Hannibal's standards.

Will may give Hannibal a hard time about the proximity of his foxhole to Baltimore and Wolf Trap, but he can't say it's not a relief to know that the drive can be dealt with before the neighbors think to check the morning mail. Two hours is a nap between feedings in that first month of Beatrice's arrival. It's the commute to and from Quantico. No longer than a "conversation" at Hannibal's office, on the occasions that they were merely companionable sessions and not covert attempts to manipulate each other.

They'll both have to work on that - healthy co-parenting is better done without light induced seizures or veiled implications that Will doesn't think he actually had the throughput to act on at the time.

Will glances to the side, where Hannibal leans against the glass of the passenger door, hidden by a thin blanket rolled up into the window, dozing in the defused warmth of the sun.

Still tired from his escape, Will suspects, watching the creased pinch of Hannibal's eyes, or maybe just finally beginning to realize how exhausting it is to manage a baby from sunup to sundown. Abigail had been a teenager on the verge of going to college - Hannibal could hardly say he had recent practical experience with child rearing. Or cross country trailblazing while on the run.

Even in sleep, Hannibal's arms are clutched around the open mouth of the granola bar box, Beatrice's head looking every bit like an egg between the flaps and several carefully rolled fleece garments to simulate a chair. She is babbling into what looks to be the sock Hannibal had been so particular about keeping straight, content with the sway and the rumbling of the old engine, the texture of the sock in her mouth, and the rise and fall of Hannibal's chest where the box has been clipped in with him. She's easy, even when she's hard.

*Wholesome*, thinks Will, adjusting the rearview mirror. *Just like any parents who have never considered stabbing each other.*

*If those people exist,* he concedes after a moment's extra thought.

It's been forty-five minutes, and the commuters pay no mind to just another car between them and their offices. They will go to their jobs, eat lunches or skip them, go home. In approximately eight hours, they will turn on their televisions or their radios, or read from the tiny screens of their phones that Hannibal Lecter and his accomplice's vehicle have been spotted north of Saguenay before disappearing again, because Jack Crawford has no evidence that they have *not* . The commuters will continue about their lives without ever thinking that's wrong.

Will mentally rewrites the headline:

***The Unremarkable Road Trip of Minor Terror on I-495***, he begins, using his turn signal to politely merge for his exit. ***Unlike the heretofore unnamed accomplice who looks to be interested in moving to the Laurentian Plateau to fulfill her destiny as an aspiring survivalist, local area man Will Graham and his accomplice were spotted south of Alexandria on the Capital Beltway this morning, flagrantly disregarding federal child safety regulations amidst a litany of other sins, up to and including harboring a fugitive, being a fugitive, evading arrest, and general disrespect for Newtonian physics.***

A police cruiser sits in the median of the exit, too busy with a speeding ticket to mark the passage of the lightning blue truck with its pink blanket corners waving in the wind drag. As a couple exits pass by, Will releases a breath he didn't realize he was holding.

He continues, staring down the southward asphalt belt, trees, vines, and the green grass no more remarkable than the highway to Hannibal's townhouse.

***They are suspected to be making for the Chesapeake Bay like a summer vacation carpool for the criminally insane. Citizens are encouraged to continue to ignore them and go about their daily lives in the surety of their opinions, as they always have, and offer no further well-meaning advice about kids or personal anecdotes about how family life used to be much harder.***

An hour and a half into the countryside of Calvert County, Will allows himself with featherlight fingers to grab Hannibal's hand with his own. To wake him, of course, he tells himself, feeling the rise of cuts and the veins at the back of it, not because it finally feels like it will be allowed after all.

—

The house is exactly what Will suspects it would be - tasteful, expensive, angular to the point of looking like an evil lair. A bit like the lawyer's office, if he's being frank, like Hannibal had seen it from a great distance and decided that was exactly what was missing from his portfolio - a Bond villain hideout where matters of the law can be manipulated to his preference.

It sits snugly against the shore, far back on a generous property line with no mailbox and the neighbors no closer than a quarter mile to either side. Really more what Will had been shooting for himself when moving to Wolf Trap before he conceded to the impracticality of it, sans all the modernist architecture.

Hannibal is unbearably smug about the whole of it, and chiefly about Will's constipated face at first sight of it coming out of the treeline.

"Surely you didn't think I put all of my assets under one name," Hannibal says, counting pavers in the front yard after a moment of sitting in relieved silence in the driveway, until he kicks one over and fishes up a key from beneath it. "I'd hardly deprive you of any of them, but it's best to keep your eggs in more than one basket for such an occasion as this, yes?"

Will frowns severely behind him at the nearby cliffside and tidily tarp-covered Cabriolet in the carport, following like a goose with his gosling. Leaf litter lays scattered over the patio and chairs, tucked into the entryway, forgotten by time and hands to tend them. Not a well lived-in place, but a well thought out one.

"Ah yes," says Will, bouncing Beatrice to distract her from the aggravation of having been woken, and the imminence of a diaper change. "The perennial wisdom of buying real estate instead of keeping some cash stuffed into a cracker tin in case you need to skip town."

“Is that your father’s wisdom, or yours?” asks Hannibal, waving a hand, paying no attention to this surliness and seemingly restored at the sight of the closed front door, debris and all.

He eyes the key with satisfaction, and the sound of the lock clicking open with delight. “There’s a case to be made for leaving at a leisurely pace,” he says, looking back. “You’d barely notice someone walking in a mall full of people, but your eyes are drawn to someone sprinting to the exits. We’ll rest for a bit…see how Chiyoh is managing life as a stunt driver and backcountry ranger of fortune. It’s doubtful they’ll keep up with her once she’s well away from the road.”

“I will kindly request that no more cases be made for the rest of the year,” Will sighs at the safety of an enclosed house, no matter its many splendid windows and bay views. “And instigate no further familial sacrifices, thank you…I’ve had more than my fill of yours.”

“This one isn’t new, but merely changed,” says Hannibal, toeing out of his boots and Will’s socks. It’s strange to see the whiteness of his bare feet, like he should look away, almost more naked than actual nakedness, voice echoing above them into the lofty ceilings.

“We are closing the chapter on what this house was always for - a safe haven for you, me, and a daughter,” Hannibal says, and it hangs in the rafters, between lights.

Will looks away.

(*There it is - the guilt again. The ever present ghost of the child that didn’t belong to either of you, and you’ve put to rest but won’t easily forget. Blue eyed, round faced, stuck between two men that struggle to speak without drawing blood. Neither of you had learned to be soft enough with each other yet, to give her what she needed, but she’s what you thought of when you prayed for this to be fixed anyway.*)

After a moment's passing, he instead looks at Beatrice - lets her scream a little into the voids of the room where she is shrill, and cranky, and a little fascinated with the sound where the anxiety of the last 48 hours has no bearing on her.

“It's different than I imagined a year ago,” Hannibal hums softly, shiny eyed and staring. “But perhaps it’s good to feel surprised after all.”

Her face is round too, Will supposes. Blue eyed still, even at a few months now. She has no fathers other than the ones here, and Will doesn’t know if that’s good or bad, only that it is, and that is how it has been crafted to be. They are both prone to biting, but the gratefulness of being together dulls the urge. They are getting older. They are learning patience with each other and her.

“Not as different as you’d think,” says Will, not sharing these thoughts, but feeling they are understood anyway. “Surprising in good ways.”

(It ***is*** *fixed. Not as either of you thought possible, but mended with gold all the same.*)

—

The first two weeks are not unlike the first two days Will gathers Beatrice from his bed, unfolding the congratulations card with shocked awe. They are less filled with calls to local governments for entirely practical reasons, not the least of which being risk to life and limb of all parties involved, but a measure of surrealness keeps Will from settling into the high ceilings and modern whiteness of the house, certain that this all must be a dream or a terrible mistake.

(*A mistake only in that you have almost exactly what you wanted, and that’s never really been allowed before. Who would let you have both her and him? No one - and you know it, and guard it, and watch the road with suspicion even as you walk the long driveway and see that nobody is there.*)

“You should relax, Will,” says Hannibal in the evening after their arrival, holding his wrists out to the mercy of Will and an old power saw.

“When was the last time anyone changed the blade on this thing?” asks Will, who knows that’s not what Hannibal means, even if Hannibal himself should be terrified of letting Will anywhere near his wrists with bladed objects. They only need to split the broken cuffs

enough to break the hinge, but judging from the age of the tools available to them, Will wonders if it wouldn't be less risky to just break Hannibal's thumbs and keep their remaining fingers crossed for a smooth recovery.

"Probably never," Hannibal replies glibly, moving a hand to turn Beatrice in her box on the countertop. This too is a familiar sight - a nice saucepan sitting on the stovetop, boiling water around the teal blue of bottles in need of a cleaning. "I bought them at an estate sale as a backup - you'll have to forgive my lack of industrial and medical grade equipment here, save some necessities. I didn't think I'd need an angle grinder on such short notice, but I can see now that was incorrect."

"How you had something ready to go in Italy on the off-chance my skull would pop in for a visit but somehow not in a permanent residence is beyond me," Will says and sighs through his nose. "Isn't that weird, Bea?" he asks the tuft of hair peeking over the flaps of the box - they really need to find her another chair. "How is your father supposed to teach you piano if I amputate both his hands? Very short-sighted of him."

"Very," Hannibal says with a serene smile, and only flinches the first time the cuff hinge catches on the serrated blade.

And that is how the majority of their conversations go - Hannibal glibly handling Will's anxiety, and Will finding new reminders of reasons to be anxious, with the baby between them buffering their worst tendencies. There's emotional reckonings aplenty buried beneath the necessity of survival, and Will doesn't pretend they aren't going to have an ugly conversation someday about them, but they are together, and gratefulness overtakes them both in waves, pushing in sand from the shoreline to smooth their edges and bury sharp things.

They rest, handing the baby off when one or the other is tired, as normal parents across the world do. It's good to know they can do that - uncomplicated things that do not necessitate psychological theses about each other that need proving, or the compulsions to test each other's resolve.

Beatrice is plenty happy to provide that service as a third party - nature's most effective drill sergeant, expectant of meals, and demanding of naps.

She does not exempt him from the experience Will takes on alone at the start, still thinking Hannibal is a stranger, that he doesn't sound familiar, or that he doesn't do her routine incorrectly where Will has mastered parts of it. He cannot reason his way out of this either, dismayed when she prefers Will. It is perhaps the greatest revenge that Hannibal could have ever perpetrated on himself, continuously running up against ways that his big frightening brain is still in fact wrong, and no more profound than the perfect-looking families in Wal-Mart magazines are.

The profound truth being that all parents are perpetually screaming into the void and hoping that the children (*and they themselves*) survive - something that comforts Will once Will learns to accept it.

Hannibal doesn't quite snort when Will shares this, too entrenched in his sense of etiquette to manage it, but it's a near miss.

To his credit, there's not been a shred of hesitation in Hannibal to take on her marked refusal to change sides, nor for the tantrums, and the refusals to go to sleep, and diaper changes, and every indignity in between. Beatrice vomits on him? He changes clothes and goes straight back to it. Beatrice doesn't like the angle of the bottle's approach? He tries half a dozen alternatives before he must rewarm the formula, and now suddenly the first approach was fine, please stop trying different things.

Hannibal often insists on taking all of the responsibilities, to the point of Will feeling vaguely left out when the opposite was true for so long, like Hannibal intends to strong-arm his way into becoming the favorite. He seems to rest the least for a person who needs it the most, favoring a fractured collarbone, road rash, and a whole autumn color palette of bruises from proud face to white, uncovered feet even when Will takes over by necessity, following Will and the furious red face of the baby around in scant, limping dignity.

When not shadowing their steps, Hannibal finds a tablet to shop and keep up with the goings-on of a world that thinks he has a unique need to run away to the Arctic Circle and not be seen again.

He proves to be an industrious online shopper with credit cards that Will cannot fathom the finances behind. One day groceries appear at the end of the lane, and in the days after that many cardboard boxes that put Beatrice's little granola box to shame - "something to grow

into," Hannibal jokes, unboxing what is surely the nicest car seat Will has seen, leaning down to set her in its packaging instead.

Some day further down in all that, comes a manila folder of a familiar color and courier service to the one that brings Will Beatrice's fortune. Will does not ask how much this costs - a great deal more than the house, he imagines.

There's not much to mark its appearance anymore than the dozens of other items, made as common and expected as the rest. There are some brief remarks made over a slim burner phone the day of its arrival, and a family walk to the end of the driveway where a shiny silver Aston-Martin breezes to the entry of - never stopping from its fast roll down the back road - to throw said manila folder to the ground.

"Thank you Byron," says Hannibal to the ground with a barely there laugh, bending to pick it up.

"Thank you Byron," says Will later inside the house, looking over two sets of passports with names he doesn't know, wearing faces he does. He remembers the man buying a boat in celebration. He thinks he might do the same someday, instead of in grief like the last.

—

Even the media grows bored with them after a while. ***Hannibal Lecter Still At Large***, the news says one day on the front page, and a week later, ***Cannibal Madman Nowhere to Be Seen***, partially buried and sounding less like a real person by the day.

There's not much to be done about the FBI Most Wanted List, which flaunts an arrest photo next to a gala candid shot as the duality of man that Hannibal is, but once Chiyoh disappears from the highways, so too does the obsession.

"I did tell you she was very capable," says Hannibal.

“I never doubted she was capable,” says Will, “only that odds of capture start becoming higher with repetition and greater numbers. Four people escaping in less than 48 hours is a lot for Jack to live down…Freddie must be delighted.”

“The world was always going to find another flaming wreck to watch burn,” Hannibal says. “So long as there are no farewells left by the Chesapeake Ripper, the Chesapeake Ripper is dead in the public eye.”

“I didn’t think you’d be content for your coverage cycle to end so abruptly,” Will smirks into a mug of coffee, moving it in quarter-turns between his hands.

It’s pleasant, sitting here on a windy day, watching the water sometimes and Hannibal’s handling of Beatrice in a one-armed grip for the rest of it, shaking a capped bottle in the other. Not something either of them probably thought fleeing the police could look like a year ago, much less peacefully so. Being able to laugh at Hannibal’s vanity should have been a whole planet of possibility away, but here they are at breakfast, only an hour or so south of where the whole ugly ordeal began.

Hannibal tilts his head, pressing Beatrice’s wobbling head to rest in the crook of his arm - she squawks, as her favorite sound.

“Better the congressman and his intern than us,” says Hannibal. “Perhaps if you had sent me some generously solicitous letters like they had, we might still be a trending topic.”

“Oh, you’d like that, would you?” Will snorts, taking a sip of coffee.

“Consider me open to unique opportunities to take advantage of you,” says Hannibal, “you being fifteen years older than the young man in question aside.”

“Degenerate,” Will accuses with no real venom. “What do you consider leaving me to be a single mother?”

Hannibal doesn't reply - just coaxes the baby to eat, talking to her very softly in what sometimes is Italian, sometimes French, and sometimes something that Will doesn't know at all. That's ok, Will tells himself, scrolling through articles, and finding all the usual haunts. It's not meant for him, much like the matching green onesie on Beatrice' squirming body to Hannibal's sweater isn't.

Will does turn up a few new things, courtesy of his least favorite person still alive to know and make it his problem. He is tickled to be the proud owner of his very own missing persons announcement, looking very dour and hateful from the busy web frames of TattleCrime - something old that Freddie and Jack would have thought was closer to when they last saw Will, and that other people would recognize from his own news cycle in years past. He stares at himself in the tablet screen, scruffy faced and glaring, eyes hidden behind his glasses.

***Ex-FBI Profiler Gone Without a Trace - Foul Play Suspected*** says the headline, first page news here, but third page by the local news standard. Will likes Freddie's version best, despite himself. It's nice to know at least one person thinks he is competent, if totally insane.

***Foul play, but not the kind you suspect, dear readers,*** says Freddie in her overly friendly way, like she and anyone who happens across her page bring their foreheads together to read in conspiratorial glee. ***A face we all love to hate is just as at large as his baby-daddy, and no one seems to know what to do about it.***

***While Jack Crawford and the Marshals have played the idiot in the now weeks-long escape of Hannibal Lecter, they've botched it twice in the disappearance of Will Graham - yes, the very same one that Lecter proclaimed mad love for, the very same that may or may not have killed a young researcher from the Museum of Natural History, the very same carrying a baby around on his hip that lays claim to the Lecter Family Castle Grounds.***

***Does that sound like a case of conspiracy to you? I certainly think so, and those of you familiar with the whole sordid history should suspect the same.***

"Have you proclaimed mad love for me?" asks Will, turning his mug nervously, only meaning to be funny. "Amidst our whole sordid history? Freddie Lounds thinks so."

“Have I not?” asks Hannibal lightly, leaning against the counter, working a good burp out of the baby with a hand moving in wide circles over her tiny shoulders. She doesn’t strictly need it anymore, a very particular eater, but Will thinks sometimes that Hannibal does, that maybe she’ll stay small a little longer so that he can know what it’s like.

“You might not like her,” Hannibal adds, looking thoughtful between the tablet on its stand and Will’s face, “but Ms. Lounds is a good study of character.” It’s careful how he says it, watching only Will now with a half smile.

*No,* comes the instinctual response, because Will has made it a habit of decrying him to decry the pieces of himself that match. *No, because I am tired of being expected to guess everything. No, because the both of us have learned over many ugly events that words are significant, and implication is subject to interpretation.*

He’s had some time to think about that between days waiting for and in court, and days locked in the house - how he’s constantly halfway between swearing an oath to kill Hannibal one day for his deliberate harm and obstinance, and the sensation of missing an essential part of himself that he didn’t know was gone.

*“Did you know you’re missing a hand?”* people could ask him in the store, and Will could look down and flex its absence, not remembering what it had been like before when he didn’t know he was whole. *“Did you know you only have half a liver? Did you know your mouth was only half-filled with teeth?”* And Will does now - feel every bit of him that’s gone that Hannibal takes with him, not because he has carved those things off, but because they shared every blood-stained piece of them and were only waiting to realize that’s ok.

He’s had to learn that. No one’s told him, least of all Hannibal who is afraid to be vulnerable too. Will doesn’t know if that’s necessarily love as much as self-acceptance and preservation - the works of two selfish people figuring out how to be human with each other.

But where their synchronicity may not be, Beatrice is. Too inconvenient to Hannibal for selfishness, who’s never wanted to share Will. Too beautiful for something other than bald-faced, gritted-jaw, teary-eyed love.

(*How could she not be? Something to fill the voids of Hannibal’s absence, something Hannibal never wanted filled before, and with no expectation to share it with you. You tell*

*him you don't want to think about him anymore, that you want him to undo everything he did, and he* ***can't*** *, not literally because time only moves forward, but she is as close an approximation that he can offer, with such fervor that even the universe hears him, and the sun rises thirty days later, his apology in his blood and yours, and* ***still*** *he goes quietly into the snow and the dark alone.*)

(*Is that not it? Does that not count? His gloriosa donna, Bedelia calls her with an envy that she cannot fully disguise - his love for you that moves the sun and other stars?)*

Will scrolls down the screen, not reading the rest - just letting the pictures disappear upwards and away where they cannot accuse him anymore of being blind.

"No," says Will, throat unexpectedly tight. "Not in so few words, anyway."

Hannibal nods, crossing the room.

"Good then," he says around his smile, mouth full of shining white. He walks around the edge of the dining table to take Will's hand in his free one, laying lips to the tender wrist there. Not a kiss - just a brush of skin to skin, the humid breath almost more intimate. " Freddie is convinced I am a few liters short of a bushel, but we both know better. I'd hate for you to think I did without knowing what I was doing."

Will holds his breath, pulse in his throat and in his arm in the shape of thin lips.

Hannibal turns back to the kitchen, prattling on in whatever language pleases him, adjusting the baby's socks once more to walk to the end of the lane and back.

Retreating, Will guesses, and lets him with the coffee going cold in his grip, and Beatrice squawking from hallway to front door to front entry with nothing but a good natured hush between them all.

(*You don't take it personally - you don't know if Hannibal knows how to say anything plainly, even if he does manage it in a few words. You know what he means, and that he is afraid to be rejected or misunderstood, even if it looks crazy from the outside to anyone other than you. Who, other than you, would have seen a stork baby and said "Ah yes, that's how Hannibal Lecter says sorry." "That's how cruel mouth and tongued men that delight in your wickedness and theirs turn bites into kisses, their mean observances into song."*)

Will sits for a while, watching the white caps on the bay, their wings moving the water from river to ocean to wherever they need to go from there. He sits long after the door gently closes again, his mug taken to be rinsed and replaced, the sun sailing with the foam against the shorelines and away into the west.

(*You suppose you don't know how to say things plainly either.*)

—

After a few hours to himself, Will finds that he doesn't need the separation from Hannibal - that he's supposed to reassert himself as present. Accepting. The man who crawled into a box with the expectation that things would work out, not that it was a crab trap.

They meet again in the hall, but only after the sunset leaves the Chesapeake nothing but an inky lake in the growing dark, and steals the sleeplessness from Beatrice's eyes. She rubs her tiny fists to them, yawning, lashes wet with the remnants of another attempt to convince her that a small spoonful of polenta is not an assassination attempt, but merely Hannibal's eagerness to expand her palate being premature.

Honestly, a very relatable problem.

Melodramatic, that daughter of Hannibal Lecter's, Will thinks with a small smile. Closed-minded about changes to her diet, that daughter of Will Graham's.

Routine is to be observed even in this liminal space of a home - baths to be poured from warm cupfuls, night clothes to be snapped closed, nightcaps to be drunk from bottles both milky and full of wine depending on the hand that holds them. It's pleasant in the same way

that sitting at the dining room table drinking coffee is - shuffling around each other, glasses of bordeaux in between loose fingered grips or set aside as needed, bumping into each other trying to find one thing or another that they both know could be done with only one person in the room.

The domesticity of it is almost disgusting, but domiciles call for that, as does forgiveness.

(*It's not enough to trust - you must forgive without a knife this time.*)

Will leans in the door frame, watching Hannibal lay Beatrice down - minding her tiny hand, settling the small stork plush nearby, watching *her* until the cool navy blue of the night closes her eyes and uncurls the fist she makes. There is no impatience in this, save the smooth shift of his weight from foot to foot, waiting for her to drift deeply enough off that their absence won't be noticed.

"You figured her out tonight pretty fast," Will says quietly from his slouch, fingers leaving prints against the bowl of his glass. He thinks of the police someday dusting them when the three of them are long gone.

Hannibal's own glass clicks lightly against the dresser he left it on when he picks it up again, nodding and taking a sip, gesturing widely for the two of them to exit. It's something of an indecent sip by his standard, like he's thirsty, or missed it in the shuffle of the night's duties, but an appreciative one anyway.

"It hardly takes a psychiatrist to know that bedtime rituals are good for sleep," he says in similar quiet. "I dare say I'd sleep better with a drink and a hand to rub my back too."

What a visual. "You're halfway there," Will says with a shy grin into the bowl of the wine glass, teeth clicking on the rim.

Hannibal hones in on that, eyes very black in the unlit hallway - not the smile, but the click, judging from how he considers the wine and not necessarily Will.

Will tries to envision it - how the glass is trapped between incisors, that every ridge of them is a pressure point waiting to chip it. That his tongue presses against the rise of the edge, that there is the drip of bordeaux running from it back down to the rest.

(*That some amount of it is your spit. That you think he'd lick it away before it could disappear into the bowl, that he'd swallow the whole mouthful you take now from the open crease of your grin to the contracting of your throat at the back. That he did once without wine, that you've not dared picture it again for the surge of want that closes around you.*)

Will turns his head, face hot and thankful for the evening's dying glow.

Hannibal doesn't - wine glass held to the side of his face, the shadows of it a tangle of oily black and red.

They've both shied away from this until now - that not everything about them is a philosophy class chalkboard problem. Maybe a mixture of that and a splash of curiosity for each other that doesn't recognize what a normal boundary is.

People go on dates to find out if they like each other, or if they have chemistry. Will and Hannibal blow up the chemistry lab apropos of nothing, and everyone just assumes that they are volatile and that they must surely not want to blow up more buildings now that they know, proving that they don't know Hannibal very well, and that Will has been all but medically declared unable to resist a volatile conflagration if it's suggested to him nicely enough.

Will chews the glass edge at that thought, feeling very affectionately annoyed and warm.

It's Hannibal that finds his courage first, as it often is. It must be nice knowing his own appetites. Will feels adrift at each and every new one, no matter if he enjoys them or not. Maybe it's because Hannibal knows this that he speaks first, even when smarting from the possibility of rejection again. That's a kind of love too that doesn't always say things plainly, Will supposes.

Hannibal crosses into the hall, draining his glass to set neatly aside on a small table. Above it, a Rothko plays at being the sunset too - dark blue and rosy, looking like another window.

"You asked that I keep my casemaking to myself for a while, but…I find I have one more case to make," says Hannibal, hand in hand with Will's. "If I may."

It is whispered to the little hairs at the base of Will's neck, each breath rustling them. They comb behind his ears. They ask to crawl under the neck of his shirt to warm the collarbones there. They want to find the edges of his mouth and burrow there, keep warm under his tongue, against the insides of his lips.

Will shivers.

One more case doesn't sound so bad.

(*You talked a big talk about this before - his capability, versus your manual dexterity, how everyone could have a good time if you tried - are you brave enough to prove it?*)

"You may with conditions," says Will, feeling one hand come sliding up the underside of his arm, four fingers tracing their way to the cuff of the white t-shirt, cloud soft and curious to find the join of his shoulder, how the ribs hide his heart. His skin breaks into goosebumps where they stop, waiting for permission.

"Name them," says Hannibal without a second's hesitation, hand still carefully stopped.

Will looks at the ground and the plush carpet, Hannibal's feet there and poised cat-like, ready. It's weird to think that people move like that, ready to act - that maybe it's the last thing most see when encountering this particular one in the wild. It shouldn't be attractive. It very much is.

"I didn't know what I was doing before," Will says, not quite as smoothly as he hoped judging from the brief look of disappointment on Hannibal's face. It's hardly there, just a blip

on the radar, but it stings them both to see it and be seen.

Will waves his hand, shaking his head as he goes. “Not like that,” he clarifies. “Not unwilling or unaware of what it meant. Just…literally out of my depth. Content to be shown.”

Hannibal’s eyes widen, brows lifting.

He understands.

“Ah, he says, mouth turning into a fond look. “Then would you care to show *me* this time instead?”

Will laughs, glad for the safety of the night’s dark. “Is that so bad? Wanting to trade? I mean it certainly could be-”

He doesn’t get to finish, Hannibal’s tense feet finding purpose in moving to close the space between them, hand softly covering Will’s mouth.

“I think you’ll find I am perfectly happy with whatever makes you happy,” Hannibal says in his own safe nighttime dark, but Will knows the amusement in his voice when he hears it. “And I have never had a moment’s doubt in your skill, and that failing, willingness to learn from example. A fast study of wants-” he says, other hand coming to pull Will’s to his side, but doesn’t finish for the violence of Will’s glass-rim biting teeth finding Hannibal’s instead, clicking their way into each other, Will’s hand a vice on the arch of Hannibal’s hipbone, his arm not quite strong enough to wholesale carry the other man, but certainly enough to *push*.

—

(*You were afraid at first you wouldn’t like it without the urgency, that in the absence of the threat of time running out that your brain would start overthinking. Where do you favor? Where do you worry with your mouth and tongue? What’s too fast, what’s too slow? Isn’t this a man? Isn’t this the same man that hurt you? That worried at the place that your ribs fall*

*away to soft stomach, that pressed the crease of your thighs between thumb and palm and you shivered for the feeling of being opened up?*

*But you do - you wish that you had known sooner that it was never a question of aptitude. Hannibal sighs his contentment at a savage bite to the skin of his chest, hissing at the sting of pinched nipples, gently soothed touches to the back of the legs, how your tongues meet and explore the careful mesa of your jaws that have both gone rough with stubble since your arrival here.*

*You laugh afterwards when you share you were afraid that you might have been declared the legal mother by merit of being the receiving party, and Hannibal doesn't, but only to assure you that fate says you were best suited to the task in that time. "Even an ego like mine doesn't pretend to be able to fornicate clear through the biological reality of dimorphic sex traits," he says to the ceiling, licking sweat from the side of his mouth.*

*"Is that an esoteric way to say you don't have a magic cock?" you ask, your arms up over your head and therefore unprepared when he wrestles his way over you and threatens to show you that he does, just not that kind.*)

—

On the 24th of August, four months and thirty days after Beatrice's arrival, nearly six from the day she is unwittingly asked for, she flies for a second time in the night.

Hannibal is strangely insistent on this date, though for what reason is anyone's guess. Will cannot divine it from nothing, no matter Hannibal's accidental tendency to think that he can, so Will agrees as long as it means nothing nefarious and that the passports will work.

It is from a small municipal airport - barely an airport at all, barely an ocean-crossing plane at all save the requirement it takes three passengers and the chest which has been matroshka-ed into a large container. They will head south to Florida, and from there, to Portugal, and anything after is a mystery. Hannibal doesn't give Will the full details from that point forward, only assuring Will that they will be enjoying the water as much as they have in the weeks that they have waited on the blufftops, with different names than the ones they wear today.

The plane hums in the dark, but moves steadily onwards, their pilot unconcerned with the fresh babyface of both Beatrice and Will, cleanly shaven again and looking very blue-eyed and young in his new passport. Hannibal, the most highly published face in the United States these days, lets his facial hair grow out instead until he looks stately and genteel, more grey than anything in his beard. Will is tense despite his best efforts to look nonchalantly well-to-do - they have spent their weeks in quiet and only in each other's company, and every person that is not Hannibal or Beatrice feels like an affront to the life that they have carefully observed from the bluff house.

It doesn't help that Hannibal is…not exactly less protective of it, but at the very least inclined to the proverbial poking of bears, and kicking of hornets' nests, maybe the occasional swear word in holy places. Weeks of hiding with no outlet but Will's often taciturn and nervous company, online shopping and articles, and the incredibly inflexible schedule of an infant, make for the kind of anticipation that drives him to walk fifty or so miles to escape prison. He is excited for life outside to begin anew, with more names, and more Will to show it to.

What a scandalous pair they must look like, Will a glossy eyed young man in his fake documents, and Hannibal explaining with aggressive friendliness that yes, the baby is still quite young, that she's not been in the air since she was delivered the first time by beak and blanket.

"How wonderful," says the pilot, looking pleased and dumbstruck. Will starts to wish it came with a sound effect, maybe a cartoonish harp playing scales as people's minds just drift off at the idea to god knows where.

"I remember my first like it was yesterday," they say somewhere over South Carolina, the lights of Charleston a warm orange glow in the night sky.

"I had to miss the arrival," says Hannibal who uses a wildly exaggerated Swiss accent in all these interactions, moving between checkpoints and technicians with his usual aplomb. "Terrible business, being tied up as I was, but hopefully now that the business is concluded, we can go home and make up for lost time."

They use that word a lot these days. To Will, home is technically anywhere the three of them are, but he ribs Hannibal subtly once when no one is looking, and says his jokes aren't as

funny as he thinks. Hannibal simply replies that he has spent his whole life unintentionally practicing dad jokes, and is hardly going to be the responsible party that stops a pun from sprouting where it wants to grow.

Will looks it up later after they land - that August 24th is Saint Bartholomew's Day, and that the storks are expected to fly south for the winter by that date. All their wagon wheel nests left empty in the highlands of Lithuania, all their wings lifting away from the grain fields to head to their polar opposite homes.

Morning will rise in the east with their little family pointed into it, and by dinnertime that night, he and Hannibal will check into a nice hotel in Lisbon to forget that they ever knew their pains across the ocean, or that this isn't the place they were meant to be. Migratory animals must be like that - assured in the rightness of where they are until the moment they aren't, and don't complicate things by simply leaving by wing, paw, or foot. The two of them crawl into bed knowing this is intermediary - that they'll catch up soon to the rest of the flock in their southbound course.

"Bartholomew is said to have performed many miracles around the weight of things," says Hannibal when Will presses him on the subject, laying side by side in the dark of this city that smells different from home, and the sun sets earlier than his body or Beatrice's knows to recognize.

"Think that's why the storks carry an order of magnitude more weight than their own body's worth?" Will asks, humming into his shoulder, watching lights on the hotel room curtains flash from the street.

Hannibal runs a hand through Will's hair, lazily pulling the curls there, running his own rough face against the smoothness of Will's.

(*You find you miss the rasping of yours against his - the scratch of it grounding each other.*)

"Perhaps. Consider the story of a cross being taken from his sainted church to be melted down by Mussolini's men," he continues, folding a hand into Will's, grasping, grasping, grasping in the dark. "But when they lifted it, they thought it to be worthless - too light to be equal to the cost of the smith's time. Once returned to its church, however, the village found it to be too heavy to lift once more, all its value restored in God's house."

“The government is generally bad about recognizing things that don’t match their projections and expectations,” Will mumbles in the dark, finding his tiredness at last. “Sociable serial killers. Cannibal puns. God, probably.”

“And good hiding spots for his gifts, serial killers or otherwise,” says Hannibal, humming as well with half an ear to the small travel bed for the baby, who despite being unbothered by jet lag, or checking into a foreign place, or switching between Swiss-French and English with little thought, or that Beatrice has scratched with tiny fingernails into the silk lapel of his new blazer and his neck, cannot help the compulsion to tell Will things in the dark, waiting for him to fill in the obvious blanks.

Will always does eventually, he says in lieu of properly explaining when Will points this out. Will supposes that’s true.

(*You’ve thought it yourself on more occasions in the last month than you care to say, and that your acceptance of it is akin to Hannibal’s of your tendency to hesitate: fondly aggravated.*)

—

As Will says at the first suggestion of their running away, money really *does* smooth out a lot of things. It buys access to citizenships. It quietly finds ways to steal and quarantine dogs for travel, at the hands of women that ought to be hiding in Argentina, but declare they miss the company of the animals more than either Will or Hannibal’s company. It breaks down the waitlist for private school.

(*Something you never thought you’d worry about, but find yourself pouring over with a critical eye. Beatrice will have to be smarter than the two of you if she wants to survive her genetics - looking at your life choices up until now, you are both obviously just stupid, not stupid in love.*)

Will sighs from the back patio, laptop in his lap, Hannibal wading with Beatrice in the pool at its edge, moving back and forth and allowing her to splash in the summer heat. It is notably more difficult to review schools without knowing Afrikaans, and difficult to ask Hannibal for help, who despite having no proficiency prior to moving seems to start picking it up quickly.

Will is working on it, but unsociable, and therefore less quick and less open to being instructed.

It is also notably strange to adapt to experiencing two summers back to back after what felt like a lifetime of emotionally turbulent falls, winters, and springs.

Cape Town is lovely, as is the Cape Dutch home that Hannibal and presumably Byron Metcalfe finagle from the ashes of the trusts that he has access to. The walls are white, the tiles a warm red-brown, and all the rooms turned to face the rich cerulean of the Southern Atlantic coast where the wind pushes the white curtains like wings to either side of the doors and windows. There is not the convenience of no extradition treaty with the United States, but there is the fact that Hannibal is but one of many eccentric European types, and hardly a blip on the radar so long as he can keep his surgical skills to himself, and his veiled allusions to the benign scholarly kind.

He doesn't promise anything, but Will doesn't expect it either. For now, he relies on Beatrice to keep tempers cool, and the days full. How anyone has the energy to murder someone through her current bout of clinginess is beyond Will, and seemingly beyond Hannibal.

(*You keep half an eye open anyway - there's nothing to distrust in the behavior of animals. Only to expect.*)

Watching him walk to and fro in little more than his tiny swim briefs and a rash guard to cover the seal burned into his back, tiny baby arms waving akimbo in the blue of the pool, Will thinks he looks harmless. It's comical to know he's evading literal centuries of prison sentence time to begin teaching basic water buoyancy to a baby who has started teething and only wants to chew on his arm and scream.

(*Which, yes, you think you feel the same on occasion, in a cosmic horror-romance kind of way.*)

Do star ratings mean much in foreign search engines left by expatriates? Will wonders half-heartedly, wiping the sweat from the side of his face, shaded in the tall branches of a cedar wattle tree where heavy chains of yellow flowers swing sweetly in the breeze. He supposes he can't complain about that, even as an answer for a problem that won't matter for another three or four years won't manifest, and further assuming that they are still here.

Will doesn't like to think about that. The house is new, and the language difficult, and he's not sure he's totally integrated his new world view of what's down versus up in the Southern Hemisphere, but it's home so long as it will have them.

Anyways, he's got two dogs waiting to finish their vaccination testing and immigration, and four anxiously awaiting their turn, Chiyoh patiently enjoying a condo on the California coast with them.

He'll personally see to the next person that tries to mess this up for them, if only to keep Hannibal from returning to old habits when he seems content for the time being to play tutor, physician, and father.

(*Day trader too, but Hannibal doesn't like to talk about that - "what a worthless title," he grumbles to you one day when he explains over the phone what he does in the way of work, a proud doctor who cannot take the title for fear of recognition. You overlook sometimes that most of his mess was self-made, and his sacrifices a consequence, but it was hard work that got him there, and he was proud of it.*)

He closes the laptop with an irritable sigh, covering his eyes with an arm, listening to small splashes in the pool, and Hannibal's occasional requests to not be bitten, and polite suggestions that the chlorine is probably not very appetizing. Beatrice hums on, chewing her own fingers, and Hannibal's when he pulls them away.

He grabs at the cold neck of a beer bottle, taking a swig and pressing the glass to the side of his neck.

There is a swooping noise somewhere behind all of that.

Will opens his eyes, squinting to the tree and the long shadow of its branches hidden in leaves and flowers. Hannibal and Beatrice continue on unbothered, hopefully tiring each other out. It would be a blessing for her to be too worn out to grind her whole four teeth together, the horrible noise of them pressed and furiously sliding beginning to put both Hannibal and Will on edge. It would be a blessing for Hannibal to not pull out the first year language primer too, and opt to grab a beer of his own to enjoy the night rolling in later with the tide.

Will stares onward, too smart to ignore the tell-tale dread in his stomach.

And the long arching line of a pitch-black neck.

"*No,*" Will says quietly, standing with his beer, peering furiously into the leaves.

"What's the matter, Will?" says Hannibal, pulling Beatrice from the water to furiously wiggle at his hip, her little feet barely breaking the water's surface. With the longer hair and the fully manifested beard, he barely looks like himself with or without his sunglasses pulled up, but he does anyway, frowning into the brush.

Will dares not put it to words.

He barely dares look at the thing, clawing (*legging?*) its way up with from the center of the tree to a branch better suited to looking down ominously on the unsuspecting victims below.

Hannibal, as quick a study of scene as he is of language and routine, figures it out anyway. Will knows he does, because he briefly tries to repress a grin, mouth twitching at one corner, before being pressed back down into studious seriousness.

"Why Will," he says, starting to rise from the pool, "if I didn't know any better, I'd say you'd never seen a stork before."

*Speak not those words most foul*, Will thinks, braced to fight.

Hannibal's not wrong, and Will wouldn't soon forget the creature that set most of the last year off its rails, whatever a year's worth of legal proceedings rails is supposed to look like. He's grateful, of course, because he loves Beatrice and if that means storks, then logic and biology be damned, it means storks. But he's also not in a hurry to get bodied *twice* in his

lifetime by one, nor is he ready to experience the nightmare sleep schedule of a baby's first couple of months again, much less with a teething baby already in residence.

For one awful minute, Will is afraid that maybe *any* time they have sex, there will be grave, avian consequences.

The stork blinks at him, completely unaware of any of this train of thought. Its red mouth is unladen, bright against both the tree and its own proud feathers, and more than a touch bewildered looking at the small family below. It's upon closer observation that Will sees a wild assortment, if very tidy, selection of sticks in the high branches where the stork has begun to tuck tufts of moss from the mountainous cliff sides to fill gaps like a diligent insulation contractor.

With relief, Will realizes that it has its own children to tend to - or it will, with enough time and gentle weather.

Hannibal stands at his side now, allowing himself to smile when the color rushes back into Will's face.

"There's a population of them in South Africa," he says, bouncing his armload of squirming child that has begun to pluck at the zipper pull of his rashguard. "Not its typical range, but apparently quite prolific and year-round regardless."

"Oh for the love of god, stop it," Will snorts. "And we just so happen to have one in our backyard?" he asks, trying to not balk. "You, without deliberation or intent, picked a house with one actively building a nest nearby?"

"We should invite them to stay, shouldn't we? You're a fisherman…we can afford a few fish for a guest," Hannibal says, pressing a nose to Will's temple before taking a nip at his ear affectionately. "They're good luck if you do."

Will sighs, and says he supposes they are, staring at the twigs and moss where little downy heads will appear with time.

Chapter End Notes

I miss them already.

Happy Thanksgiving! Thank you to everyone that has followed along for the last near to two years - this was a joy to write, and I've loved hearing your parenting insights, stories, and delight with this bird-brained tale. Until the next one. <3

Works inspired by this one

[COVER] Their Beaks Not Yet Turned Red by TFE

[Restricted Work] by Cinnigraphy (Cinnamaldeide)

[Podfic] their beaks not yet turned red by Dr_Fumbles_McStupid

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